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WOODSIDE FARM

MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD

3/15

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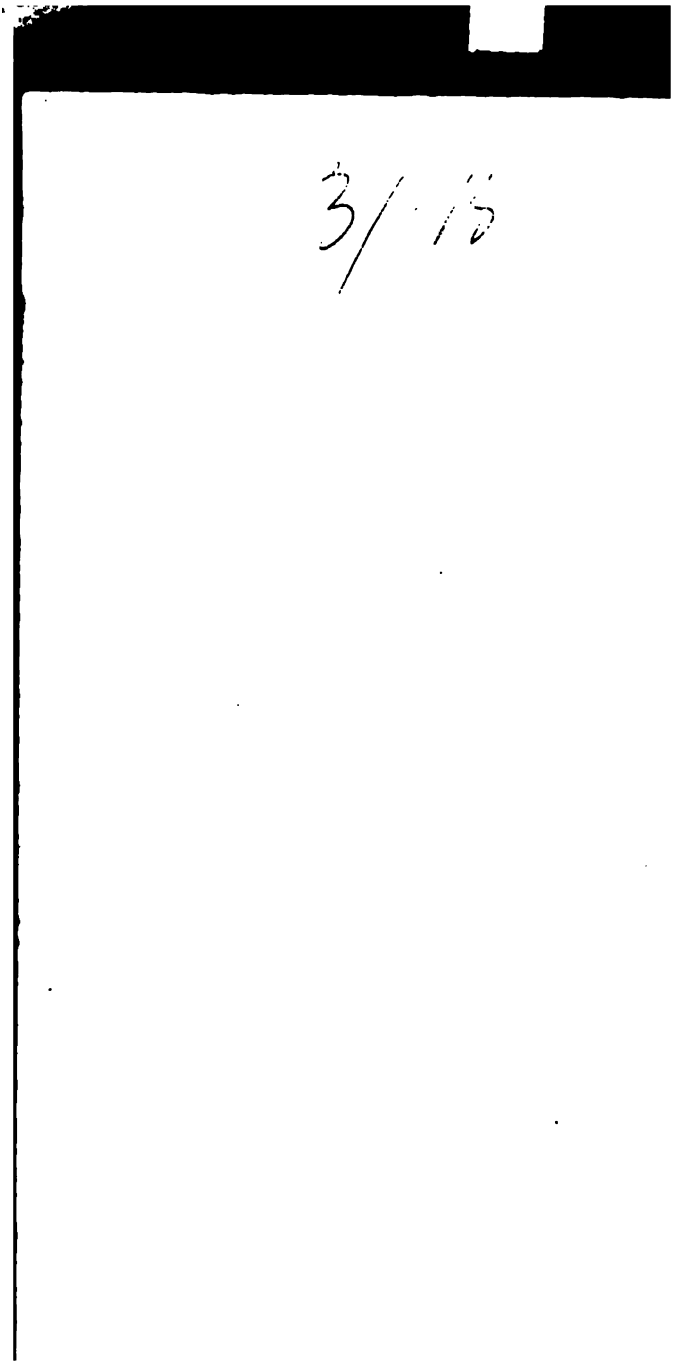
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WOODSIDE FARM

NOTE

THIS story was called 'Margaret Vincent' when it appeared in serial form. Messrs. Harper are publishing it by that name in America.

[redacted]

Louie J. Wrighton
1902

Woodside Farm

BY

MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD

AUTHOR OF 'MRS. KEITH'S CRIME,' 'AUNT ANNE,' ETC.

'Of a world still young—still young!
Whose last word won't be said,
Nor her last song dreamed and sung,
Till her last true lover 's dead.'

HENLEY.

LONDON
DUCKWORTH and CO.
3 HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.
1902

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WOODSIDE FARM

CHAPTER I

MARGARET VINCENT is the heroine of this story, but there are others who play important parts in it. Her grandfather was old Lord Eastleigh, well known in his day, fascinating and happy-go-lucky, who, when he had spent his patrimony in extravagant living, and disgraced himself as a guinea-pig, discreetly died, leaving his elder son, Cyril Vincent, all his debts and most of his difficulties. Cyril was rather amused by the title, added to the debts to the best of his ability, married a lady from the music-halls, and, finding London impossible, went a-ranching with his wife on the other side of the world. There the life and its isolation absorbed his energies and his identity. But that was five-and-twenty years ago, and this, be it said, is a modern story.

Gerald, the younger son, and only other survivor of the Eastleigh family, distinguished himself at Oxford, became engaged to the daughter of a bishop, and accepted a living from his prospective father-in-law. Within six months he

changed his opinions, threw up the living, made himself notorious, in the days when Agnosticism was a crime, by writing some articles that closed the door of every second house in London against him, and secured his being promptly jilted by the woman with whom he had been in love. He had just two hundred a year, inherited from his mother. His habits were indolent, his tastes simple. The one desire left him after the crash was to get out of everybody's sight, to think, and to smoke his pipe in peace; and presently perhaps to write a book in which he could freely express the bitterness packed away at the bottom of his heart and soul. He travelled for a few years, and thus lost sight, much to their satisfaction, of all his distant relations (near ones, with the exception of his brother, he had none), dropped his courtesy title of Honourable, and became a fairly contented loafer. He was an excellent walker, which was lucky, seeing that two hundred a year will not go far in travelling expenses; so he trudged over every pass in Switzerland, up Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn, down into Italy over the St. Gothard—there was no rail then, of course—and back by the Corniche road to France, up France by Avignon and Dijon to Paris, and at the end of a few years back to England, to realise that he was thoroughly well forgotten.

The streets of London irritated him with their noise, and the people with their hurrying. The

pavement tired his feet; the manner of life, that is the manner of life to be had on so small an income as his, he found difficult, almost impossible. One day he packed a knapsack, filled his pouch, walked through Putney and Wandsworth, and onwards. He breathed more freely when he reached Wimbledon, which had then an almost rustic railway station and not a building near it, drew a long breath at Surbiton and, blessing the beautiful county of Surrey, trudged on with a light heart. It was thus that he arrived at Chidhurst and discovered Woodside Farm.

Chidhurst is some miles from Farnham, from Liphook, and Fernhurst, from Blackdown, and Hindhead, from anywhere, in fact, with which the reader may try to identify it. Its nearest station is Haslemere, and that is five or six miles off. The village consists of a few cottages, one of which is a general shop, and a small beer-house. Against the side wall of the beer-house there is a pillar-box, but stamps have to be bought at Haslemere, or of the local postman. There is not even a smithy; man and beast must alike travel three good miles to be re-shod, to the blacksmith's and the cobbler's on the common. A little way from the village, standing high among the wooded land on the right, is the church. It is half covered with ivy, there are white tombstones round it, and on its square tower a clock that is seldom right and never to be trusted.

From the churchyard there is a divine view; fir woods in the foreground, beech woods to the left, heather moors to the right, and blue in the distance—soft and misty in the memory of those who love them—are the Surrey hills. A beautiful spot to stay and muse in on a drowsy summer day, a blessed one to sleep in when time has met Eternity.

A mile from the church, farther into the heart of the country, off the road, on the right, there is a duck-pond, and just beyond it, on the right again, a green lane with high close-growing hedges on either side of briar and bramble, honeysuckle and traveller's-joy; low down there are clumps of heather and the tender green of the whortleberry. Deep ruts along the lane suggest that heavy carts come and go, and presently, on the right also, are the gates of Woodside Farm. Inside the farm gates there is another duck-pond, and there are haystacks and outbuildings, and all the signs of thriving agricultural life. Just beyond the wide untidy drive, you can catch a glimpse of the Dutch garden, with its green paths and yew hedges, its roses and sweet peas. The house is an old one; moss- and ivy- and lichen-grown; a porch with a seat in it, at the front door, and latticed panes to the windows. The door opens into a square hall or living-place, red-tiled and black-beamed. On either side of the big fireplace there used to be a heavy wooden chair with

carved and substantial arms, and a red cushion tied on its back, in the centre of the room a large oak table, against the wall a dresser, an old chest, an eight-day clock, and a portrait of Queen Victoria in her coronation robes. It was here that the Barton family always sat; for the best rooms were let to strangers in the summer and carefully covered and darkened in the winter. Going up from the living-place was a wide staircase, old and worm-eaten, with a dark handrail to it, that many a dweller in distant cities would have been glad to buy for an extravagant sum. Beyond the staircase was a door leading to the red-tiled kitchen, where Towsey Pook, the house servant, who had lived at Woodside Farm for forty years, did such work as was required of her, which meant on an average fourteen hours a day given over to labour or thought of labour; but she was a strong woman, and well content.

Mrs. Barton owned the farm in her own right at the time when Gerald Vincent set out on the walk that ended at Chidhurst. It had descended from father to son or mother to daughter for full two hundred years. The tradition was likely to be kept up, since at well-turned five-and-thirty, after eleven years of uneventful matrimony, Mrs. Barton had found herself a widow with one child, a girl called Hannah.

Now, Hannah, even at nine years old, was an uncompromising little person, a singer of hymns

and observer of people; and this she owed to her paternal grandparents, thriving farmers and dissenters, living at Petersfield. Her father, one of a large family, had done well for himself by his marriage, since through it he became the master of Woodside Farm, which was the reason, perhaps, that his people had made no objection to the churchgoing of his wife, or even of the child. After all, too, the service at Chidhurst was a strictly evangelical one, the sermon had been known to last near upon fifty minutes, and something has to be conceded to those who hold property in their own right. Unluckily, when she was eight years old, her father being delicate, and she in the way at home, Hannah went to stay at Petersfield. Her grandfather, a stern old Methodist, initiated habits and imbued her with notions that took deep root in her nature, so that when two years later she returned to Woodside Farm to comfort her lonely mother, the result of his training was already evident. She was a plain child, and a plain woman later, with hard, grey-blue eyes, and fair hair drawn back from her forehead, a pink colour that could never be counted a bloom, and a somewhat thin face with a straight mouth and pointed chin; moreover, she had a voice that suggested a strong will and a narrow outlook.

It was a full year after James Barton's death that Gerald Vincent first set eyes on the village

of Chidhurst, and was charmed by it. He looked carefully from right to left, hesitated and stopped at the little shop to ask if there were any rooms to be had for the summer.

'There's a house, sir,' said the woman, 'it stands back among the trees, just as you come to the church. It was built for a vicarage, but Mr. Walford found it too big, so it's let to strangers.'

'I don't want a house,' the stranger said impatiently.

Then a voice from the back called out, 'There's Woodside Farm, mother.'

'To be sure,' said the woman. 'The rooms have never been let since James Barton was first took ill; but I dare say she'll be glad to get somebody. You go past the church and along the road till you come to the duck-pond, then turn off to the right and walk on till you see it.'

Mrs. Barton was spreading the white linen, which Towsey Pook had just washed, over the bushes in the Dutch garden, when suddenly she beheld not ten yards away a tall man in grey tweed, with dust-covered shoes and a knapsack on his shoulders. He was young—thirty or less, though at a first glance he might have been older; he looked studious, and as if he were a somebody, Mrs. Barton told herself later. His manner was a little awkward for the moment, but in his eye was courteous inquiry. The widow stopped and

criticised him with quiet excitement, while he thought how good a picture she made with the sunflowers and sweet peas on either side of her, and the rose bushes and patches of white linen spread out to dry in the foreground; the yew hedges and the taller greenery behind added to the effect of her. For she was comely still, though she was nearly seven-and-thirty by this time, not stout or even inclined that way, since, being an active woman, she took plenty of exercise and worried over much in secret, which prevented the spoiling of her figure.

Mr. Vincent asked if it would be possible to have some bread and butter and tea, to which she assented readily; and while he ate and drank in the living-place, he explained that he wanted to find a lodging in the neighbourhood, to which he could bring his books, and peacefully read and write for a few months. He hardly liked to propose himself as a lodger all at once, for there was an air of something that was almost distinction about the widow; it made him feel that if there were any social difference between them the advantage was on her side. She stood at first beside the oak table, and then was persuaded to sit, and she made a picture, framed in one of the big arm-chairs, that he never forgot, while she explained that there was a spare room that had not been slept in for three years past, and the best parlour that had not been used since Barton's funeral day.

She bethought herself of the odour of mustiness which was beginning to pervade them both, since she had grudged a fire by which no one sat and gathered warmth. The farm produce, too, was good and plentiful; it would be easy to feed the stranger, and his stay would put some easily earned pounds into her pocket. Thus the arrangement came about, and each of them was satisfied.

He stayed all through the summer months, and when the autumn came he showed no signs of going. The widow grew more and more interested in him, and they often—he being a lonely man and she a lonely woman, and both unconsciously aware of it—had an hour's talk together; but it was a long time before it was other than rather awkward and even formal talk. Sometimes as he passed through the house to his own rooms, he stopped to notice Hannah; but she was always ill at ease with him, and hurried away as fast as possible. He heard her speaking to Towsey sometimes, and occasionally even to her mother, in a way that made him call her 'a spiteful little cat' to himself; but it was no concern of his: there was nothing of the cat about the mother, and that was the main thing.

Mrs. Barton was surprised at first that her lodger did not go to church on Sundays, and the neighbours were curious about it, which embarrassed her; but she felt that it was no business of hers, and that since Mr. Vincent was evidently

above them in position and learning it did not become them to make remarks. Besides, as Towsey was always busy in the kitchen at the back, it was comfortable to remember, while she herself was in church on Sunday mornings, that some one was left in the house who might be called a protection to it; for tramps had been known to come so far, and even such a thing as a fire might happen. So when she departed in her alpaca gown with crape trimmings, her widow's cap inside her bonnet, and her prayer-book and black-edged handkerchief (she had six of a goodly size and serviceable thickness) in her hand, across the fields with Hannah by the short cut to the church, it was with a sense of calm contentment. Mr. Vincent used to stand in the porch and watch them start; then, filling his pipe, he smoked in peace, and revelled in the extra quiet of the Sabbath day. The incumbent of St. Martha's, a man of no particular attainments, had thought of calling on the stranger and tackling him about his soul, till he heard incidentally that one of the writers of 'Essays and Reviews,' who had been staying at Guildford, had driven over to Woodside Farm. Then he came to the conclusion that he might possibly get worsted in argument, and it would be the better part of valour to leave his doubtful parishioner in peace, even though it ended in perdition.

CHAPTER II

For two summers and a winter Gerald Vincent lodged at Woodside Farm. He was a singularly silent man, and Mrs. Barton knew no more about him in the last month than she had done in the first. But he filled her thoughts till unconsciously she grew fond of him. She watched him out of sight when he went for his walks, and felt her heart leap to his returning footsteps. The best roses were cut for his writing-table, the ripest fruit for his dessert or breakfast, and once when she lingered in the best parlour, dusting it before he was down, she lifted a half-written slip and kissed it, knowing that his hand must have rested on it: for youth does not monopolise romance, and even eight-and-thirty can know its agitations. After a time Mr. Vincent became aware of her feeling for him; it embarrassed him a good deal, but he was touched by it. Then he realised almost with surprise the clear outline of her face and the sweet firm curve of her lips. He told himself of her merits, her domestic virtues, and the manner in which, single-handed and calm-headed, she managed the farm. Gradually it came about that, instead

of staying in his own room in the evening, he sat with her—he on one side and she on the other of the great fireplace in the living-room; and the companionship was all the more pleasant because Hannah was away. For Hannah was a good twelve years old by this time and, for the sake of school advantages, staying with her grandparents at Petersfield, where she learnt more and more fervently to despise the particular forms of the devil and all his works in which those who were not of her own way of thinking most delighted.

It was on those evenings, and while Mrs. Barton knitted socks which he knew well enough would be offered to himself, that Mr. Vincent noticed the disappearance first of crape and then of black in the widow's dress. He saw, with half-sorry interest, the little arts, such as an odd bit of finery and the management of her hair, by which she strove to add to her attractions, and he never pretended to himself that he misunderstood them. He realised, too, the good points of her figure—the set-back of her shoulders, and that she was tall and had a certain presence, even dignity, born of adherence to simple rules of life. In a quiet, unexcited way, he became fascinated. Here was the natural human being, he thought, as God had meant it to be, unadulterated by scholarship or passion or knowledge of the world. He felt that he and she and nature made a trinity framed by the Surrey hills and all the beautiful country round

them. He wanted no other home than the farm, no other method of getting about than the brown wooden cart and the broken-winded cob, no other companion than this sedate woman, who knew nothing of his history or inward life, yet who somehow gave all his thoughts a setting, and put him into moods that helped him to write down many things that he hoped some day to give to the world. It is difficult to say how these things come about, or what will lead a man and woman knowing little of each other to marry; but the unaccountable happens too often to need dilating upon, and the great facts of life that stare us in the face occasionally make in themselves a grotesque argument in favour of spontaneous generation. Thus it happened that one night, after a long silence, Gerald Vincent said quite simply:

'Mrs. Barton, I have been wondering lately whether it is right of me to go on staying at the farm on our present footing?'

'Why, Mr. Vincent!' She looked up at him with her pure grave eyes, and surprise in her voice. 'I 'm sure if James knew he 'd like to feel that you were here.'

'I wonder if he would: I have heard that he was a godly man, and I am not.'

'Don't say that,' she answered anxiously. 'I 've always held with doing what was right rather than with the saying of prayers, though James's people,

of course, are different and very strict in their notions.'

'You know nothing about me,' he said, going on with his own train of thoughts, 'of my family, or my doings before I came here, and yet I have been wondering if you would marry me?' It did not seem necessary to him to tell her that his father had been a peer, or that his brother had made a foolish marriage and gone to the Antipodes, or that he himself had thrown over the Church and wrecked his prospects on a metaphysical rock. These things, and knowledge of them, were so far outside her world and thoughts that telling her could serve no good end. It was better to be silent.

She went on with her knitting for half a minute, then put it down and spoke, and there was a something in her tone that reached his heart: 'Do you mean that you've got to care for me?'

'I think you are the kindest soul in the world,' he said, and his own voice was not very steady, 'and too young still, and too handsome,' he added with a little smile, 'for it to be right that I should go on living here, whether it is as your lodger or your friend. We have been friends for a long time, you know——'

'I have come to think of you as one,' she said simply.

'You wouldn't like me to live anywhere else?'

'I couldn't bear the thought of it,' she answered under her breath.

'But I can't go on staying here, except as your husband. I think we could be content enough.'

She turned her head away from him, a happy smile struggled to her lips. He saw that she trembled. He rose and pulled her gently from her seat, and they stood together in front of the fireplace.

'Well?' he asked.

'I don't know what folk would say.'

'Does it matter? We shall live outside the world, not in it.'

'And then you never go to church?'

'I will make an exception to the rule by taking you there for half an hour while the parson prays over us. How is it to be? Perhaps you should think it over before you answer. I have nothing to give you——'

'Oh——' she raised her eyes and looked at him reproachfully.

'I am a poor man with a couple of hundred a year, and no more to come. I can be no help to you in your home, but I want nothing more from it than I have now. You can keep it all for Hannah by and by. Well?' he asked again.

With a little sigh she drew closer to him. 'I couldn't say "No," Mr. Vincent, for I'm fonder of you than of any one in the world.' He tried to look into her eyes, but they were downcast, and a

twitch came to her lips. He stooped and kissed her, and waited till she spoke again. 'You 'll be good to Hannah?' she said anxiously. 'You see she won't be away so much by and by, and she'll look to come to her home. You wouldn't interfere with her?'

'My dear soul, I should interfere with nothing. I don't know why I am trying to disturb our present relationship, except that it seems to be the only way of preventing it from coming to an end. Things will go on just the same as they have done. I don't propose to alter anything. We will be married one morning at Haslemere—or at Guildford, perhaps; no one will be likely to come upon us there—and Woodside Farm will be Woodside Farm still, though you are Mrs. Vincent. We will settle down for the rest of our lives and let nothing in the distance disturb us.'

'I will make you as comfortable as I can,' she said in a low voice, at which he smiled a little ruefully and looked round the living-room. Then he put his arms slowly round her and drew her to him with quiet affection and as if he thought their new relationship demanded it. This was their sober betrothal.

CHAPTER III

THE folk at Chidhurst village and the outlying farms talked a good deal when they heard that Mrs. Barton was going to be married to Gerald Vincent, for it soon came to be known. He was a stranger, and nearly eight years her junior; they had discovered this, and one or two other things concerning him, that he had two hundred pounds a year, and did no work save writing—writing books, perhaps, which was not work at all, but the sort of thing that people did when they had nothing else to do. And then he never went to church or chapel. It was a strange and awful thing to them to see in the living flesh, to have as a neighbour, even though they saw but little of him, some one who was certainly going to be damned hereafter. They were sorry for him in a way, for he was good-looking, and when occasion offered gave his money freely, moreover, they felt sure that his people had been above the common. So they tried to make things a little pleasant to him in this world by showing him politeness and extra consideration; but the fact of what was in store for him could not be doubted.

When the Petersfield relations heard the news, they thought it their bounden duty to promptly take the train to Haslemere, and then to commit the untold extravagance of hiring a fly to carry them to Woodside Farm. They would have told their daughter-in-law to send the brown cart to meet them; but they hoped by not giving notice of their coming to catch the unbeliever in his iniquity. They had a vague idea that he was horned and carried a pitchfork, they would not have been surprised at finding a faint odour of brimstone about the place. They looked sharply round on arriving, and were disappointed at not seeing him, then they made the best of the situation by at once sitting down in the living-room and arguing with Mrs. Barton. In ten minutes at most they hoped to make her see the folly of her position, and that it would not only be flying in the face of Providence, which had always made her comfortable in this world, but a disrespect to James Barton, dead and gone to the next, if she married a man not good enough to lie in the family grave if it pleased the Lord to take him also.

'But one of the things I like him for,' she said, 'is that he is a good deal younger than I am, so most likely it 's he that will have the burying to do this time—it 'll save me a world of trouble.'

This was a point of view they had not considered, and were unprepared to argue, so they tried a fresh one. There was Hannah. Had

she remembered that Hannah would have to live in the same house with him, too? Oh, yes; and after being used to a man about the place at Petersfield, she thought it would be so good for Hannah to feel there was one over her at Woodside Farm—an indirect compliment that somewhat pacified old Mr. Barton. Moreover he was touched with the respect with which his daughter-in-law listened to all he had to say and the sincerity in her voice when she regretted that Mr. Vincent had walked over to Lynchmere and would not be back till past tea-time. She was sure he would have liked to meet James's relations; but perhaps they would be able to stay till he returned?

'When he comes,' said Mrs. Barton the elder, 'I hope you will see that it is your duty to give him up, especially after the trouble that we have taken in coming over. We should like to hear you tell him so before we leave.'

But the younger woman was quite calm and collected, and tried to change the subject. 'Won't you sit a little nearer to the fire, father?' she asked the old man; 'it's a rough road from Haslemere, and you must be tired with your drive. You should have come in time for dinner; you will have to be starting so soon after you have done your tea.'

'We didn't come over for meals, Annie, but on more important business,' he answered.

'And we are not to be put off as easily as you think,' his wife added.

Mrs. Barton went to the oak chest and took out a fresh damask tablecloth and put it on the table. Then she stood up beside it, as she had done on the first day that Gerald Vincent came to the farm.

'I don't want to show you any want of respect,' she said firmly; 'but it's no good saying anything about Mr. Vincent, for I am going to marry him, and his religion makes no difference. He has given up a great deal because he would not make a pretence.' Gerald Vincent had felt it was better to acquaint her with that fact of his history. 'He has thought about things, and read and studied, and if he thinks they are not true he has a right to say it. I think God will respect a man who says out honestly what he feels. There are some who haven't courage to do it, and I know this—I'd rather have his chance in the next world than the chance of many a man who lifts his voice in Petersfield chapel at prayer-meeting on Sunday nights. If he doesn't get to Heaven because he has faith, why, he'll get there because he's honest.'

'And what do you think James would say?' asked old Mrs. Barton.

'James knew it would be hard for me to manage alone. I'll be proud to stand up and tell him how Mr. Vincent came and took care of me after I was left: he'll be glad enough.'

'Not when it's an unbeliever, Annie——'

'A man that's honest and speaks the truth, even though it makes people turn against him, mother.'

The old people began to feel uncomfortable. Tears or excitement they could have done with, but this quiet determination was more difficult to fight.

'Have you thought of the example for Hannah?' they asked, harking back to what they felt to be a strong point in their favour.

'I have thought of everything,' she said, lifting her calm eyes. 'He'll not interfere with Hannah; she'll be allowed to go to Petersfield whenever you want her, and she'll go to church just the same; and so shall I.' She turned to old Mrs. Barton again: 'Hannah is James's child, and she'll be brought up as James's people wish. She is a girl that is going to have a will of her own—she has got it already, and it will grow. There is no occasion to be anxious about her.'

'And what's to become of the farm?'

'The farm will stand where it is. I shall deal fairly by it for Hannah, if that's what you are thinking of.'

Then the old man came to the rescue. 'God will not have mercy on you hereafter, if you marry this unbeliever,' he said.

'Father, I will trust God to deal fairly by me. He'll not do less than man.' She paused a

moment and then went on: 'You mustn't think I haven't thought it over, for I have. We must all work out our salvation for ourselves, and if Mr. Vincent has chosen a road that we don't go along ourselves, why, I think the end will be the same for us all who try to do our best. It would be shaking one's confidence in God to think different. But you 'll be wanting your tea, and it will be better than arguing about a man you don't understand, and one that I am going to marry, say what you will.'

'I never thought you 'd be so obstinate, Annie,' Mrs. Barton said.

But nothing moved the mistress of Woodside Farm, and the old people felt their visit to be a mistake. They had not gained their point by coming; on the contrary, they were going away beaten, and they didn't like the position. They even began to cherish a latent hope that Mr. Vincent would not return before they left, lest they should come off second best in argument with him too. Meanwhile, they made a large and mournful meal with the air of folk at a funeral feast, for they felt that it might be the last time they would sit round the big oak table. Luckily the tea was strong and the cream thick. Towsey's scones were admirable, the strawberries in the jam were whole, and the poached eggs and ham done to a turn. Half an hour later the fly was brought to the door, a reproachful farewell

taken of Mrs. Barton, and the disconsolate pair drove away towards Haslemere station.

Gerald Vincent and Mrs. Barton were married a month later. Outwardly it made little difference in their relations. The best parlour was still his own retreat, and his books and papers were scattered about with a happy confidence that no hands but his own would touch them. In the evening he generally sat in the living-place with his wife; he liked its gauntness, the big fireplace, the old oak table, the comfortable chairs, and the heavy door that in the summer-time stood wide open and let in, from the Dutch garden beyond the porch, the scent of flowers, the stir of leaves, and the rustling sound from the tall trees behind. In the winter there was the crackle of the beech logs, the flickering of the candles in the double candlesticks with japanned shades, and the long deep shadows on the walls. It was all old-world-like and peaceful. He wondered that he had ever endured the hurry and noise of towns. In the first year he used to read to his wife—Scott and Kingsley and other authors that he thought might interest her. She was always appreciative, and from her pure-hearted outlook even gave some criticism that was worth hearing, though she never became cultured in any sense. But simple though she remained, Gerald Vincent was never ashamed of her, and she never bored him. He felt that daily life, or such portion of it as he

spent with her, was to his soul pretty much what a cool bath was to his body. After a time there was Margaret, a babe with blue eyes and little double fists, and seeing that the child took up much of its mother's time and thought, he drew back into the isolation of the best parlour without fear of being thought neglectful.

The Petersfield relations kept Hannah with them till she was sixteen. Then, since she had left school, and her hair, that always looked scanty on the temples, was done up into a knot behind, and one of her eye-teeth had decayed, they thought it well to send her back to the farm. But old Mr. Barton had not talked to her in vain, and she went home with a smothered resentment in her heart that had a touch of horror in it towards the stranger, and a shrinking she could never overcome towards his child. She kept herself well in hand, it is true, and, except that he could never get behind her reserve and somewhat snappy manner, she and Mr. Vincent got on pretty well together seeing that they inhabited the same house. She developed into a thrifty young woman with a distinct capacity for that state of life in which she found herself, and with dissent so strong within her that, within a month of her going back to Woodside Farm for good, she had begun secretly to store such little sums as she could honestly consider her own in order some day to build a chapel at Chidhurst. Meanwhile,

she contented herself with the somewhat dreary service at the little church on the hill.

To Mrs. Vincent the years after her marriage were the happiest of her life. She gave her husband a quiet, self-contained worship that expressed itself in many creature comforts, for which from sheer blindness he was never sufficiently grateful. But he knew that he was the whole world to her, and, as time went on, this knowledge was not untouched with dismay at finding that sometimes he wanted more intellectual sympathy than she was able to give him. But she never guessed this, and after her little Margaret was born it seemed sometimes as if only tears would prevent her joy from being more than she could bear.

It was during these years that Hannah saw her opportunity, and little by little managed to govern her mother and every one on the farm with the exception of Mr. Vincent. Even Margaret was made to feel that Hannah was mistress of the situation, and the putting on of a best frock or the arranging of a little holiday could not be done peacefully without asking her consent.

CHAPTER IV

MR. VINCENT and his daughter drew very near together in the years when each from a different standpoint unconsciously hankered after companionship. She read books with him, and did tasks that she found delightful, since they kept her a prisoner in the window-seat of the best parlour, whence, looking up, she could see him bending over his papers. He even arranged to take her to Guildford twice a week, so that she might have a music lesson from the doctor's widow, who earned a modest living by teaching. And on her seventeenth birthday he gave her a piano. Its arrival was quite an event at Woodside Farm.

'It will be a rare thing to hear Margaret play,' Mrs. Vincent said, as she watched it being put into place.

But Hannah was contemptuous. 'It would have been better to have bought a good harmonium,' she snorted; 'it might have been useful some day——' She broke off abruptly, for none knew of her secret store towards the chapel; and there was no occasion to speak of it, since it

had not yet reached the modest sum of twenty pounds.

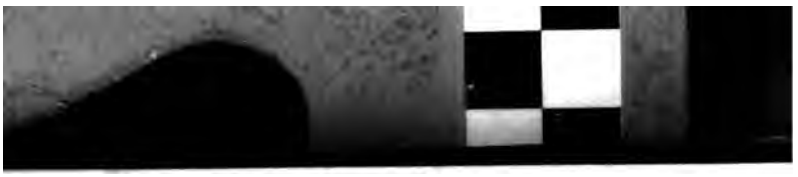
Money had perplexed Hannah a good deal of late; there was the desire to put it away for the pious dream of her soul, and the womanly impulse to spend it on finery—hard, prim finery. For at Petersfield there dwelt a thriving young house agent, in a good way of business, smart-looking and fair-moustached, and possessed of a far-seeing mother, who had suggested that Hannah would have the farm and a bit of money some day, and make a thrifty wife into the bargain. This accounted for what might be called an investigation visit that Mr. Garratt paid her grandparents one Sunday afternoon when Hannah was at Petersfield, and his asking her to take him across the field to see a tree that had been struck by lightning the previous fortnight. Afterwards he had been pressed to stay for tea, and his tone was significant when he remarked on leaving that he had enjoyed himself very much, and hoped to get over to Chidhurst one Sunday for the morning service, and to see the grave of his Aunt Amelia, who was buried there. Hannah being too grim—it was counted for shyness—to say anything pleasant, old Mrs. Barton had told him, in a good business-like tone, that when he went he had better look out for Hannah and her mother, and walk back with them for dinner at the farm. This was two months ago. But

Hannah waited patiently, thinking that if he appeared it might be as well to hear what he had to say, since by this time she was well on in her twenties—at the fag end of them, in fact—and marriage was one of the possibilities to be considered in life. Thus every week brought its excitement for her, and as yet its disappointment.

Sunday brought its excitement for Margaret too; but it was a happy one. For when the country folk were sheltered in the church or busy with those things that kept them out of sight, she and her father had their best time together. Then it was that they loitered about the deserted fields and outbuildings, or went up to the great beech woods standing high behind the farm, and watched the still landscape round them, just as in the first years of his coming Gerald Vincent had watched it alone from the porch. They called the beech wood their cathedral—the great elms and beeches and closely-knit oak trees made its roof and the columns of its aisles—and it seemed as if in their hearts they celebrated a silent service there to a mysterious God who had made joy and sorrow and all the beauty of the earth and given it to humanity for good or ill. In a sense, Margaret had no other religion. Her father said that when she was old enough to understand and think for herself she could make her own beliefs or unbeliefs; meanwhile she need only remember to tell the truth, to do nothing that would cause

another pain, and to help those nearest to her, never considering their deserts but only their needs.

Gradually Mr. Vincent grew uneasy concerning life at the farm. For himself he was content enough, a little longer he could be content for Margaret; but afterwards? Besides, a reaction comes to all things, and now and then when he saw the far-off look in her eyes and heard the eager note in her voice—a sweet eager note like that of a bird at dawn—he felt the ghost of old desires stirring within him, and an uneasy longing to see the world again, so that he might know what manner of place Margaret would some day find it. It came upon him with dismay that she was growing up, that this tall girl of seventeen would soon be a woman, and that she was going to be beautiful. Pale generally, and almost haughty looking, dreams in her eyes, and gold in the brown of her hair, and a mouth that had her mother's sweet curved lips. A girl's face and simple, but eager and even thoughtful; the impulses of youth characterised her still, but womanhood was on its way, and now and then, in spite of her happy laugh, her blue eyes looked as if unconsciously they knew that tragedy dwelt somewhere in the world, and feared lest they should meet it. But as yet Hannah's scoldings were the only trouble that had beset her. These were not to be taken lightly, for as she grew



older Hannah's tone became harsher, her manner more dominant, and the shrinking from Margaret and her father, that she had always felt, did not grow less. Margaret bore it all fairly well, sometimes resisting or passionately protesting that she would run away from the farm and the scold who had taken its whole direction into her hands, and at others hiding herself in one of the lofts till the storm had passed. When it was over she crept out to her mother—always to her mother at those times—to be soothed and caressed. Even Mr. Vincent felt that Hannah was a hard nut to crack; but he contented himself with the thought that some day Margaret would break away from her present surroundings: a beautiful girl, who had read a good deal and was cultivating the habit of thinking, was not likely to make Woodside Farm her whole share of the world.

The beginning of the end came one October morning in a letter from his brother in Australia. It had been sent under cover to his lawyers; for, though in a general way, the brothers knew each other's whereabouts, in detail they knew nothing. Cyril Vincent (he was now of course Lord Eastleigh) was ill of an incurable disease, and though he had no intention of returning, his thoughts were reaching out to England. His early career had been a disgrace, his marriage had proved a ghastly failure, and the least he could do was to cover it up, together with his own life, on the

other side of the world. Gradually he had developed a strong sense of social and moral obligation that had made him hate himself when he remembered the advantages to which he had been born. Of what use had he been with his dissipated habits, he thought bitterly, or could he be now that he saw the folly of them, with his health permanently ruined, his wife vulgar and often drunken? If birth or accident had given such people the right to be counted as aristocracy, then by every law of Heaven, and for the sake of those things that make for the salvation of the race, they ought to be stamped out.

The letter came at breakfast time. Mr. Vincent was still thinking it over when Hannah pushed back her chair with a grating noise along the tiled floor, and said in a rasping voice:

'I shall be driving to Liphook this afternoon if anything is wanted.'

He rose hastily, but hesitated on his way to the best parlour. 'You might call at the post office and ask when the Australian mail goes,' he said.

Mrs. Vincent and Margaret looked after him; then, as was their custom, they gathered up the breakfast things and carried them to the kitchen. Hannah was there already, searching round the shelves and cupboards as if she expected to come upon a hidden crime.

'I've no time to iron those muslins to-day,' she said; 'you had better do them, Margaret. I

never see why you shouldn't help with things. Mother and I have enough to do.'

'But of course I will. I like ironing, especially in cold weather.'

'There isn't a curtain fit to put to a window, and my hands are full enough,' Hannah went on, as if she had not heard the conciliating answer. 'Towsey will put down the irons. Till they are hot, perhaps you had better run out a bit,' she added impatiently; 'you always make so much of the air. For my part I find it better to look after one's work than after one's health; one brings the other is what I think.'

Mrs. Vincent had gone slowly towards the best parlour. She opened the door and looked in. 'Shall I come to you for a minute, father?' she asked. Since Margaret's birth she had generally called him 'Father'; his Christian name had never come very easily to her.

'If you like,' he answered, without looking up from his papers.

'I thought you were worried a bit with your letter.' She stood behind him and touched his shoulder. Time had accentuated the difference in years between them, and the caress had something maternal in it.

'I meant to talk to you about it presently,' he said, and turned reluctantly towards her. 'It is [redacted] my brother in Australia.'

[redacted] any trouble?'

'Yes, he 's in trouble, I suppose.'

They were silent for a moment; then she spoke, and he loved her for the firmness in her voice. 'If it 's money, we can help him. There 's a good bit saved from the farm these last years. I never thought milk was going to pay so well.'

'It isn't money. He is ill, and not likely to get better.' He stopped, and then went on quickly: 'He made a foolish marriage before he left England; but I don't know that there is any use in our discussing that.' It seemed as if he were closing an open book.

'Has he no children to look after him?'

'No.'

She was silent for a moment, as if she were trying to face something that had to be done, and nerving herself to speak. 'It isn't for me to know what 's best. I never knew any of your people, or saw any one belonging to you——'

'That 's true,' he answered awkwardly.

'I am not asking you to tell me anything,' she said hurriedly. 'Every one has a right to his own history, and I don't hold with giving it out just for the sake of talking. Many lives have been upset by things there was no need to tell——' She stopped again, and then went on bravely. 'But what I am coming to is, that if your brother is ill, and has nobody but his wife who isn't any good, you might like to go out to him?'

'To go out to him!' The thought made his

heart leap. The quiet years had ranged themselves round him lately like the walls of a prison —a friendly prison in which he was well content— but it seemed as if he had suddenly come in sight of a doorway through which he might go outwards for a little while and come back when he had seen once more the unforgotten tracks.

'It might comfort him,' she went on without flinching. 'And you wouldn't be more than a year gone, I expect. It must be terribly dull for you here sometimes. I've often thought how good you've been.'

He put his hand on her arm: 'All the goodness has been yours,' he said, 'there is no woman like you. I often think it.'

She turned her eyes to the window lest he should see the happiness in them, for she had always been half ashamed of loving him as she did—a staid woman of middle age with homely matters to concern her. 'I don't see that I have done anything out of the way,' she said.

'Did it never occur to you that you have not seen a soul belonging to me, that really you know nothing about me? I was a stranger when I came, and you took me in.'

'One knows a good deal without being told. I've always felt that your family was what it should be; and there's been all your life here to judge you by.'

He looked at her and felt like an impostor.

He knew that the fact of his father having been a lord, or his brother being one now, would not uplift her as it would a vulgar woman. On the contrary it would probably be an embarrassment to her, and a reason for being silent regarding them, since she would think it unlikely that people who were her superiors in education and knowledge of the world would desire any kinship with her. On her own side, too, there was a certain pride of race, of the simple life that she and generations of her people before her had lived —that and no other. Strangers might come into it, might be welcomed, served, and cared for, even loved; but she herself did not want to go beyond its boundaries, and though she treated all people with deference, it was deference given to their strangerhood and bearing, and to the quality of their manners, rather than to their social standing. Her husband knew it and respected her for it, and felt ashamed to remember that his father had been a spendthrift and a Company promoter, and that his brother had made a hideous marriage. People who did these things were plentiful enough in London, but they were unknown at Chidhurst. All that she definitely knew about him was that he had been at Oxford—at college, as she always put it—and afterwards that he had been in the Church and left it on account of scruples; but concerning the scruples and what they meant precisely, she was always vague. If she had been

asked to describe her husband's character she would probably have said, as if it were a paradox, that he was a good man, though he didn't go to church on Sundays.

They had stood silently together for a minute, busy with their own thoughts; then he spoke. 'I fear Hannah doesn't think much of my life,' he said.

'She means well, but she's been brought up strict. James's people were always strict, and he was, too, though he reproached himself at the end for not being strict enough. That's why I feel I ought to give in to her a bit, and let her do what she thinks is right, when it doesn't clash with you. I wouldn't be surprised if she married some day; Mr. Garratt's written saying he'll be at Chidhurst soon, and he'd like to pay his respects to me, having known James's people so many years.'

Mr. Vincent was amused. 'Oh, well, if Hannah's going to have a young man about the place, I had better get out of the way,' he said. 'I'll write to Cyril by the next mail and tell him of your suggestion.'

CHAPTER V

OTHER letters followed that first one from Australia. Lord Eastleigh had caught at the suggestion of Gerald's visit. But he carefully faced the probable course of his illness. The chances were that he might go on for some time longer, and he thought it would be best to bring his brother out when the end was getting near. Gradually they had learnt all there was to know of each other, and in middle life and far apart there had grown up between them an affection of which their youth had shown but little promise. Cyril Vincent had done some work in Australia—it was the only thing for which he respected himself. Lately he had saved some thousands, and, after providing for his wife, he meant to leave them to Gerald. For scrupulous Churchman as Cyril had remained, even through all his excesses and mistakes, he recognised the courage with which his brother had stood by what he believed to be the truth; and now, when disease had seized him on the lonely Australian station, the only happiness he found was in the thought that he

might see again the one member of his family who had not disgraced it.

The months went by without alarms till Margaret was eighteen. It was mid-spring at Woodside Farm; the early flowers were up in the Dutch garden, the first green was on the trees, the sowers were busy in the fields, and all the earth smelt sweet. In the house spring cleaning was rife; it told, together with the non-coming of Mr. Garratt, on Hannah's temper, and Hannah's temper told on the rest of the family.

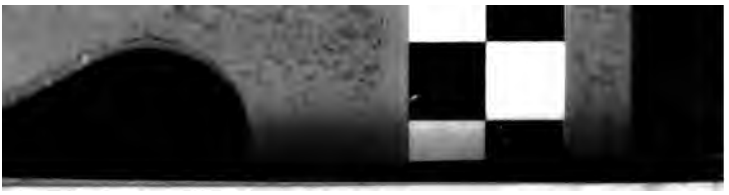
'I don't think he has behaved well,' Mrs. Vincent said to her husband. 'A man has no right to send a letter saying he hopes to get over soon and pay his respects to her mother, and then not be as good as his word. It isn't even as if he hadn't sent her a card at Christmas, showing he still thought of her. You see, Hannah 's getting on, and she isn't satisfied at holding herself over for a chance.' What else Hannah could possibly do she didn't explain.

Mr. Vincent shrewdly suspected that Mr. Garratt's courage had failed him; or perhaps that he regarded matrimony as a sober investment to be made in middle age rather than as an exhilaration for youth, and so was just keeping an eye open without committing himself. But whatever the reason, Mr. Garratt had not yet appeared; and the effects were obvious. Hannah brushed her hair back more tightly than formerly, her move-

ments became jerky, a little pink settled itself at the tip of her nose, and her tongue took a freer range.

The hours were earlier at Woodside Farm as the spring advanced. By nine o'clock Mr. Vincent had gone to his study, and Hannah was busy in the dairy or out among the chickens. Then it was that Mrs. Vincent and Margaret allowed themselves the luxury of a little foolish talk together in the living-place. It was only possible when Hannah was not about, for she had no patience with a great girl, who might be making better use of her time, sitting on the arm of a chair. So the mother and daughter stole their little interviews together with the happy craftiness of lovers.

The postman came into the porch one morning while they were talking. Mrs. Vincent always listened for him now, knowing well that one day he would bring the message she dreaded. There were two letters for her husband, and her heart stood still when she saw that one was from Australia. But she recovered in a moment; after all, there had been many letters now, and this might be only one added to the number. The strange thing was that she never asked a question. When he had to go he would tell her, she thought; what was the use of worrying him? The other letter was an English one, a woman's handwriting in violet ink on pale grey paper. She looked at



it curiously, and felt that this too was connected with his history—that part of his history of which she knew nothing.

'You can take them to him, Margaret,' she said, and sat down again.

'Father started when he saw the one directed with violet ink,' Margaret remarked as she went back to the arm of the chair.

Mrs. Vincent looked at her daughter wonderingly, and tried to divert her own thoughts. 'I can't believe you are grown up,' she said; 'we shan't be able to keep you much longer.'

Margaret lifted the hair from her mother's forehead and kissed beneath it—soft hair, with a crinkle in it that had of late turned grey. 'What is going to happen to me?' she asked, and thought of the blue distance on the Surrey hills. It was beginning to attract her.

'I'd give the world to know. I can't bear to think of your going away from the farm.'

'But if I go I shall return; a bird always comes back to its nest, and I shall come back to your arms. Shall I tell you a secret?' she whispered.

Her mother nodded with a little smile on her lips, and tried to be interested; but all the time she knew that behind the shut door of the best parlour something was going on that might change the whole current of their lives.

'Father doesn't want to sit so much indoors as

he has done,' Margaret continued; 'so he means to buy a tent, a little square one, open in front, with room for a writing-table and two easy-chairs and a little sofa—made of basket work, you know. It's to be put up at the edge of the field, and when it's fine he will sit there and work, and sometimes we are going to invite you to tea——'

'My word, what will Hannah say?'

'Oh, she'll make a fuss, but it won't matter, for father's father. We shall have a glorious summer,' she added, with a sigh of content, 'and I am so glad it's coming. I don't believe Hannah's Heaven will be half so good as this world is in the summer-time, when everything is green, and a dear mother loves you.'

'It will be your Heaven too, Margey, dear,' Mrs. Vincent said. 'I don't like you to talk so——'

'Then I won't,' Margaret answered impulsively. 'I won't do anything you don't like. Here is father.'

'He has come to tell us something,' Mrs. Vincent said. She started from her chair and looked at him, and then for a moment at the green world beyond the porch, as if she felt that it would give her strength. But his news was not what she had expected.

'I'm going to London on Monday morning,' he said, 'and should like to take Margaret with me. Can she go?'

'How long is it to be for?' Mrs. Vincent asked, while Margaret stood breathless, seeing in imagination a panorama of great cities pass before her eyes.

'Only for a day and a night.'

'A night too?' Margaret exclaimed; for on the occasional visits her father had paid to London he had gone and returned the same day. 'It sounds wonderful!'

He thought out his words before speaking, as if in his own mind he saw the outcome of things that were going to happen. 'All the same,' he said, 'you will probably be glad to come back.'

'Yes, father, yes,' she exclaimed joyfully; 'but then I shall know, I shall have seen and remember it all. Dear mother!' and she turned to her again, hungry for her sympathy.

Mrs. Vincent always understood, and she put her arm round Margaret, while she asked her husband—'Where will you stay if you don't come back till the next day, and will Margaret's things be good enough?'

'We shall stay—oh, at the Langham, I suppose. Of course they will be good enough.'

He went back to his papers and took up the two letters again. The one from his brother was merely a reiteration of what he had said before. The important part in it was that which concerned his health. Lately there had been disturbing threats; it was possible that symptoms might

develop which would hurry the inevitable. It was to take a specialist's opinion, so far as might be gathered from a letter, to see his lawyers, and to arrange for a probable voyage in the near future, that Mr. Vincent was going to London. But it was the other letter that he lingered over, the one written on grey paper with violet ink. Long ago that handwriting had greeted him every morning. It had been a symbol of happiness, of all the world to him. He read the letter again :—

'You will be surprised to hear from me after all these years; but I heard from Cyril lately, he gave me your address, and I feel that I must write to you. He told me of your marriage, and that you have a daughter. I knew nothing about you before, except what I gathered from your articles in the *Fortnightly*. Do you never come to London? If you do, come and see me; we will avoid all reference to painful bygones, and meet as old friends. I was near you last summer. I drove over with my girl and Tom Carringford (you remember his father?) to look at a house we thought of taking. If I had known——

'Let me hear from you. I want to be told that I am forgiven for all the trouble I caused you, and that you will one day come and shake my hand. Perhaps you will bring your child to see me.—Yours always,

'HILDA LAKEMAN.'

Gerald Vincent sat and thought of the years ago, of a ball—it seemed a strange thing for him to remember a ball—and a long, maddening waltz; he could hear the crash of the 'Soldaten-Lieder' now, the long-drawn-out end, and the hurrying to the cool air. The girl on his arm wore a black

dress—she was in mourning for her sister, he remembered—and some lilies were at her waist. The scent of them came back to him through all the years. He saw the people passing in the dim light; they had drawn back—he and she—so as not to be seen, he heard the sound of laughter, the buzz of voices, the uneasy beginning of the next dance. He remembered her perfect self-possession, and his own awkwardness that had made him let the opportunity to speak slip by; but it had seemed to him that words were unnecessary. Looking back he felt that she had been interested in the hour rather than sharing it, and he wondered, with a little sorry amusement at the remembrance of her manner, how much or how little she had really felt. He thought of the summer that followed, of days on the river in late July, when the London season was in its last rushing days, the sound of oars, the trailing of the willows at the water's edge, the visits to houseboats, the merry little luncheon party on the point at Cookham. Mrs. Berwick had been the discreetest of chaperons, and when they had drunk their coffee —vile coffee it had been—he and Hilda had wandered off while the others stayed drowsily behind. How strange it was to think of it all. He could feel still her arms clinging round his neck, and hear her low, passionate whisper—'Yes, yes, I love you—I love you—I love you!' Words had never come easily to him, and he had been

ashamed of his dumbness when she could find them. Remembering them now, her tones rang false. He thought of his Ordination, and the happy winter when gradually he had put aside the foolish dissipations, and work and love made up his life; of the curacy he held for a little while. Hilda had been full of some scheme; he understood it dimly when he went to the Bishop's palace and she had whispered—it was the first sign of what was coming—'Who knows but that some day we shall be installed here, you and I?' The Bishop gave him a living later, and she cried triumphantly: 'I made father do it. It's the first step. I shall never be satisfied till you are on the top one.' The speech worried him, grated on him all through the long first evening by his vicarage fire, though he tried to forget it. He read her letter the next morning almost desperately; luckily it had been a simple, affectionate one, and he thanked God for it, and prayed that all her desire might be, as his was, in the doing of the work before them, in the good it might bring to others, and not in the reward they would personally reap from it. There had been a happy time after that, just as if he had been heard. He remembered his simple faith in her, his peace and security in those days, with wonder. At the end of the summer he had not wanted to leave his parish so soon after going to it, so he stayed on through August and September while Hilda went

with her people to the Engadine. A man came down to stay with him—a queer chap, Orliter, of All Souls, professor of philosophy, now at a Scotch university. Orliter brought a cartload of books with him ; he read them all day and smoked, and Gerald did the same. Then followed talks that grew more and more eager, often the night passed and daylight came while they were still arguing—nights that were symbolical of the darkness he walked through, and then the slow dawn of what seemed to him to be the truth.

It wanted courage to do the rest, but he had done it. There had been the difficult interview with the Bishop, and the long miserable one with Hilda, who had treated his new views as though they could be thrown aside as easily as a coat could be taken off. She had implored him to remember that they meant the blighting of his career, social ruin, the desertion of his friends, the breaking of her heart. It would be impossible, she had explained to him, to marry a man her friends would not receive—a man without position or prospects or money, with only talents which he was evidently going to apply in a wrong direction, and opinions that would create a little desert round him. He had looked at her aghast. To him truth was the first condition of life and honour ; to her it was of no consequence if it spelt inexpediency. Her attitude resulted in his writing some articles that made his position worse

in a worldly sense; but he loved her all the time, his infatuation even became greater as he saw the impossibility of sympathy or agreement between them. But he was too strong a man to let passion master him; besides, it seemed as if all the time afar off, Truth stood with the clear eyes that in later years had been his wife's attraction for him, and cool, calm, and unflinching drew him to her —away from the woman who protested overmuch, from the Church that pointed upward to an empty sky, from all the penalties and rewards of religion. Whether his conclusions are right or wrong, a man can but listen to the dictates of his soul and conscience. And so Gerald Vincent turned his back on all that he had believed and loved; but remained an honest man. While he was in Italy, squarely facing the ruin of his life, he heard of Hilda's marriage. There had been a quarter of a column about it in the daily papers. He read it a little grimly. A few years later he heard of her husband's death, but there had been no sign of her in his own life till the letter came that morning. He read it again, then locked it away in a desk.

He heard his wife's footsteps pass the door. He rose and looked out. She was standing in the porch with her back to him and her face towards the garden, for she and Nature were so near akin that on grave and silent days they seemed to need each other's greetings. He stood

beside her, and looked silently down at her face with a little sense of thankfulness, of gratitude, for all the peaceful years he owed her, and he saw with a pang the deep lines on her face, and the greyness of her hair, as Margaret had done only an hour before.

'Why, father,' she said, with a little smile, 'what is it?' Then, with sudden fear, she asked, 'Is he worse—does he want you yet?'

'Not yet, but I 'm afraid it won't be long,' he answered. 'I shall be able to tell you better when we come from town.'

Hannah grumbled, of course, when she heard of the journey. Then, grumbling being useless, she busied herself in seeing that Mr. Vincent's portmanteau was dusted out, and that the key, which was tied to one of the handles by a bit of string, turned properly in the lock. And a strange old bag, made of brown canvas and lined with stuff that looked like bed-ticking, was found to carry the few things that Margaret was to take. It was the one that Hannah herself often used when she went to Petersfield, and therefore obviously good enough for any other member of the household. But Mr. Vincent looked at it with surprise: he remembered in his youth seeing the under-gardener's son set off for Liverpool, and the bag he carried was just like this one.

'I think we must buy something else for you in London, Margey,' he said.

'I dare say you 'll do a great deal when you get there,' Hannah struck in sharply. 'It's to be hoped you 'll take her to see Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's, for I suppose you think nothing of the City Temple, or the Tabernacle, and Exeter Hall, which I should say were the only places worth going up to London to see. It would be as well for her to get an idea that in one way or another people have thought a good deal of religion, though you and others like you put yourselves above it.' She waited, but Mr. Vincent showed no sign of having heard her. 'I 'm afraid that one day you 'll find you have made a mistake,' she went on. He pulled out a little pouch and rolled up a cigarette.

'Are you going to drive us to the station yourself?' he asked.

'I suppose I 'd better,' she answered. 'I don't know what's come to that boy lately. If I send him over to Haslemere he never knows when to get back.'

So the cart was brought round on Monday morning. Mr. Vincent and Hannah got up in front, while Margaret sat behind, with the portmanteau and the canvas bag on either side of her. Mrs. Vincent stood waving her handkerchief till they were out of sight, then went with a sigh to the best parlour, thinking it would be as well to take advantage of her husband's absence and give it an extra tidying.

The postman came a little later. Seeing that there was no one in the porch he trudged to the back door, where he sat down on a four-legged stool, that the boy had painted grey only last week, and prepared for a little talk with Towsey.

'Have you heard that the house by the church is let? Some one from London has taken it for the whole summer,' he was saying as Mrs. Vincent entered the kitchen.

'What have you brought, postman?' she asked. He gave her a letter for Hannah. It had the Petersfield postmark; a smile came to her lips when she saw it. 'It's the hand that directed the Christmas card,' she said to herself. 'And it's my belief that Mr. Garratt's coming at last.'

CHAPTER VI

MARGARET was in the seventh heaven when they reached London. The drive from Waterloo to the Langham—the bridge, the stream of people, the shops—were all bewildering. She could have sung for joy as they drove along in the hansom.

'It appears to please you,' Mr. Vincent said with a little smile.

'It does! It does!' she exclaimed. 'Only I should like to walk along the pavements——'

'You shall presently.'

'And look into all the windows——'

'I 'm afraid I couldn't stand that.'

'I wish we had to buy something, then we should go into a shop.'

'We will,' he said, and presently put his hand through the little door at the top of the hansom, which was in itself an excitement to her. They stopped at a trunk shop.

'But, father——' She was breathless.

'We must get you a Gladstone bag,' he explained.

She tripped into the shop after him. It was like entering the ante-room of an enchanted land,

for did not great travellers come here before they started for the North Pole or the South, to fight battles, or to go on strange missions to foreign courts? No one guesses the happy extravagance of a young girl's heart on all the first times in her life—the dreams that beset her, the pictures she sees, the strange songs that ring in her ears.

'That's a great improvement,' Mr. Vincent said when they re-entered the cab, and a good serviceable tan-coloured Gladstone had been safely put on the top. 'We will throw the other away when you have taken out your things.'

'Oh, no, father—it's Hannah's.'

'True. She can take it away as part of her trousseau.' Mr. Vincent laughed at his own little joke. He looked young, he was almost gay, as if he, too, felt that they had come out on a wonderful journey in this simple one to town. But he had suddenly discovered a new pleasure in life; for it had not occurred to him that Margaret was so unsophisticated, or that there could be so much that was new to her.

Everything was a joy—even the little sitting-room at the Langham. This, she thought, was what rooms in London looked like—rooms in hotels, at any rate. But though a new experience came upon her every moment, all the time at the back of her head she saw a white road with clumps of heather and gorse beside it, and a church on a hill: a mile farther there was a duck-pond and a

lane that led to Woodside Farm: already, even through her impatience to see more of this wonderful London, she looked forward to the first glimpse of her mother's face watching for them on the morrow.

'I'm afraid I shall have to leave you here for an hour or two. I have come to London on business,' Mr. Vincent said. 'But I must try and show you some sights presently, though I'm not good at that sort of thing. Perhaps we might go to a theatre to-night——'

'Oh, father, I have so often wondered what it was like.' She was almost breathless.

'You shall see.'

'But what would Hannah say?'

A twinkle came to his eye; at a safe distance it was amusing to think of Hannah's wrath. 'It shall be something that won't hurt us very much,' he said. 'I believe *King John* is going on still. I will try and get places for us while I am out.'

'Couldn't I go with you—I mean about your business?'

He considered for a moment. It was one of his characteristics that he always thought out his words before answering even trivial questions. 'It would be better not. I want to arrange some family matters.'

'But I am family,' she pleaded.

'That's true.' He hesitated again before he went on. 'You know that my brother—he is

your uncle Cyril, of course—is ill, and I may possibly go out to him.'

'Yes, father, I know.'

'I want to find out how ill he is, if it is possible, from the account he gives of himself. A specialist may know.'

'You never told me anything about him. Is he older than you?'

'Of course. That is why he inherited the title.'

'Oh!' She looked up rather amused. Chidhurst folk had none of the snobbishness of London, but titles are picturesque and even romantic to a young imagination. 'What title?'

'He is Lord Eastleigh,' Mr. Vincent answered reluctantly, 'as my father was before him; but a title without property to keep it up is not a very praiseworthy possession. It generally suggests that there has been extravagance or bad management, or something of the sort.' He stopped again, and then went on quickly: 'After his marriage he went to Australia, and we knew nothing of each other for years till he wrote some months ago.'

'Mother told me. Are you rich, father, can you afford to go to him?'

'I have two hundred a year and a legacy of five hundred pounds—it came in some time ago, that will pay the expenses of the journey.'

'I see.' Gradually she was grasping the family

position. 'It must be dreadful for his wife, to be all that way off alone with him, and he going to die.'

He looked up in surprise. It had not occurred to him to feel any sympathy for his brother's wife. He liked Margaret for thinking of her. 'Yes, I suppose it is,' he said; 'though I believe she wasn't a very desirable person. I don't know whether I 'm wise to give you these details. They are not necessary to our life at Chidhurst.'

'But I'm growing older,' she said eagerly, and held out her hands to him as if she were groping her way through the world with them. 'I want to know things. Don't keep them from me.'

He looked at her in dismay. It was the old cry—the cry of his own youth. 'I won't,' he said, and kissed her forehead.

She was glad to be alone for a little while, to get rid of the first excitement, the first strangeness of the journey, and of being at the hotel. She looked out at the hansoms setting down and driving on, at all the swift traffic along the roadway, at the people on the wide pavement. She had imagined what London would be like from pictures, and from Guildford and Haslemere, and other places where there were shops and streets. It was what she had expected, and yet it was different. She felt herself so near to the heart of things, as if the people going to and fro were the pulse of the world; she could almost hear the

throb of their lives. She wanted to be in the whirl of things, too, to know what it was all like, to understand—oh, no, no! the farm was better, the Dutch garden and the best parlour, and the mother who was thinking of her. She would sit down and write to her this very minute—it was an excellent chance while she was alone. On the writing-table in the corner there were paper and envelopes, with the name of the hotel stamped on them. Her mother would look at it and understand the strangeness of her surroundings. This was the first time they had been separated at all; and writing to her was like a door creaking on its hinges, suggesting that at some unexpected moment it might open wide to let her through.

When the letter was finished she took up one of the newspapers lying on the table. There was a war going on somewhere along the Gold Coast; she read about it, but she could not grasp the details. She looked at the speeches that had been made in the House the night before, and tried to be interested in them; but they were difficult. She tried all the little odds and ends of news, even the advertisements; and these were oddly fascinating. There was one that set her thinking. It was of a dramatic agency in the Strand. 'Young ladies could be trained for the stage,' it said, 'and engagements were guaranteed.' She wondered what the training was like, and what sort of engagements they would be. Now that she was

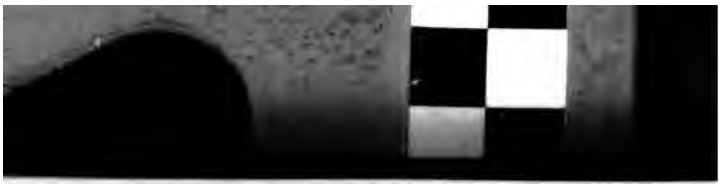
actually going to a theatre she felt that she ought to take an interest in everything; her outlook was widening every moment: she would never be quite the same simple country girl again who had set out from Chidhurst that morning.

'I can't believe that I am in London,' she thought, 'and know what it is really like. I have made so many pictures of it in my thoughts, in future they will be real, for I know—I know.' At the back of her thoughts, but in the near distance, was the theatre: to-night, only till to-night to wait, then she would know what that was like: oh, it was too strange and wonderful to be true. But all the time her mother's face seemed to be watching and the door of Woodside Farm to be standing open. She felt that she was being waited for, that into the living-place safety and rest had entered and guarded all who came to it.

Mr. Vincent came back at a quarter past one. He looked worried, and she was able to imagine reasons for it since their talk just now.

'Is the news bad?' she asked.

'It might be worse,' he answered with a shrug. 'There is nothing definite to say just yet. We must go down and lunch; an old friend of mine is waiting—he wants to see you.' Her father had put on the manner that was his armour—the grave manner of few words that made questions impossible. He opened the door with as much



courtesy as a stranger would have done, and walked beside her down the wide staircase. 'I have secured a table,' he said as they entered the dining-room, forgetting that his remark would convey nothing to her.

The table was in an alcove; beside it a middle-aged man was waiting for them. He was tall and dark, and well set-up, with a short well-cut beard, and a moustache, grizzled like his hair, that covered his mouth; his eyes were brown and alert, though time had made them dim and lines had gathered round them. He looked like a man who lived generously, but with deliberation; his slow movements suggested tiredness or disappointment; his manner had a curious blending of indulgence and refinement.

'This is Sir George Stringer; we were at Oxford together,' Mr. Vincent said to Margaret.

'I am delighted to meet you,' Sir George said; 'and it 's very good of your father to put it in that way, for, as a matter of fact, he was five years my junior. I stayed up after taking my degree.' Looking at him now, she saw that he was almost elderly; in the distance she had taken him to be younger. 'I had not seen him for more than twenty years,' he went on after they had settled themselves at the table, 'till he walked into my office just now. I didn't even know that he was a married man till the other day, much less that he had a daughter.'

'But he knew where to find you?'

'Of course he did. I am a permanent official —a moss-grown thing that is never kicked aside, unless it clamours, till the allotted number of years have passed and the younger generation comes knocking at the door.'

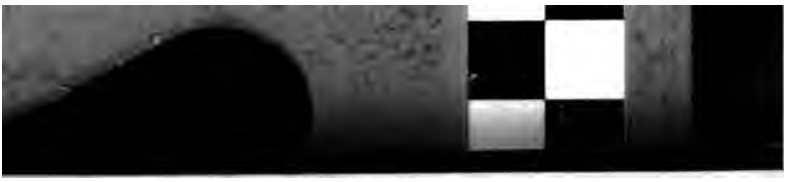
'What do you think he has done, Margey?' Mr. Vincent asked, noticing with satisfaction that she was quite unembarrassed by her new surroundings. The people at the different tables put a pleasant curiosity into her eyes, or provoked a little smile; now and then she looked up at him when some strange dish or attention of the waiters puzzled her, but she was neither awkward nor over elated.

'What has he done?' she asked.

'We saw that the house on the hill had been let when we passed it this morning——'

'It 's the most amazing thing that I should have hit upon it,' Sir George said.

'You have taken it!' she exclaimed, and clasped her hands with delight. It would be like a little bit of London going to Chidhurst, she thought, and her mother would like him, she was sure of it, this friend of her father's, who would have been difficult to describe, for, though he was old —to her young eyes—he was so agreeable. And he would be some one else for her father to talk with; they would discuss all manner of things concerning the world that she was discovering to



be a wonderful place, though Chidhurst with its beauty and its silence held aloof from it: and she would listen to them, it would be like hearing a fairy story told at intervals. If only her father did not have to go to Australia—that threat was beginning to make itself distinct, though she tried to forget it.

'It's very good of you to be pleased at the prospect of a grim old bachelor being near you,' Sir George said, and looked at her critically. Her beauty had been taking him by surprise. How lucky Vincent was to have her, he thought. He remembered his own empty rooms in Mount Street, their luxury and loneliness, the precision with which everything kept to its place, their silence and dulness. Vincent had made a mull of his life, but he had a home, and a wife who, though no doubt she was homely enough—mended his socks and cooked his dinner herself, perhaps—was probably a handsome woman, since she was the mother of this beautiful creature. In spite of his opinions, and the manner in which he had kicked aside his prospects, Vincent had not done so badly for himself after all.

'Did father tell you that we lived at Woodside Farm?' Margaret asked.

'Of course he did. I wish I had known it the other day. By the way, Vincent,' he went on to her father, 'it was young Carringford who told me of the house. You remember his father? He

was President of the Union just before your time. He died about a year ago worth a quarter of a million, and left two children—this boy, who is only two or three and twenty now, and a girl who married Lord Arthur Wanstead. They have a hundred thousand pounds each.'

'It sounds as if it could never be counted,' Margaret said.

'Only three thousand a year if they have the luck to get three per cent. for it, and income-tax off that. Well, Master Tom has some friends living on Hindhead—in red-brick houses that ought to be blown up with gunpowder, especially when they have weathercocks on their gables. Hindhead, which used to be an enchanted wilderness, is given over to red-brick houses, philosophers, pretty young ladies, and afternoon parties at which games are played with astonishing energy.'

'We are miles and miles from Hindhead,' Margaret said, bewildered. But Sir George enjoyed talking, and took it for granted that others liked to listen.

'Of course you are,' he answered genially; 'but one fine day he and the Lakemans were staying in the neighbourhood. He rode over to Chidhurst, saw this house, and thought it might do for them, so they all went over to look at it——'

'She told me,' Mr. Vincent said.

'Oh, you have heard from her? Mrs. Lakeman, as you probably know, is a lady who does not care for quite so much unadulterated nature as there is in your neighbourhood, so the house didn't suit her. The other day Tom told me of it, I went to look at it, and took it on the spot. When did you see her last?'

'A good many years ago.' Mr. Vincent's manner was a shade curt.

Sir George looked up quickly. 'Why, of course, I remember—what an idiot I am!'

'Not at all. We are going there this afternoon. Who was Lakeman? I didn't know him.'

'No one in particular; but he was good-looking, and fairly well off.' Sir George smiled to himself, and took a liqueur with his coffee. 'She was a fascinating woman,' he added: 'she has had my scalp among others.'

'I think you might go upstairs, Margey. We'll follow you presently.'

Sir George looked after her as she disappeared. 'She is going to be a beautiful woman,' he said. 'Rather a shame to hide her on a farm at Chidhurst, though, for my part, I always think that the devil lives in town and God in the country.'

Margaret felt that her father was embarrassed by his sense of responsibility when he joined her half an hour later. 'You ought to be shown some of the things in London,' he said again.

'I've seen the hansom cabs,' she said, 'and lunched at a little table at the hotel, and everything is a sight to me.'

'I suppose it is. Still, we might do Westminster Abbey, at any rate. Hannah gave us leave, you know—and then we'll go to Mrs. Lakeman's.'

'Who is she?'

'Her father was a Bishop,' Mr. Vincent said. He spoke as if the fact needed some contemplation, and to Margaret it did, since she had never seen a Bishop in her life. She knew that he wore lawn sleeves and a shovel hat, and was a great man; she had a vague idea that he lived in a cathedral and slept in his mitre. 'He died a good many years ago,' Mr. Vincent continued with a jerk in his voice. 'He gave me a living when I was a young man; but I resigned it after a year or two, and differences of opinion caused quarrels and separations. Perhaps,' he added rather grimly, 'Hannah would have called me a Papist then, and think it nearly as bad as being an unbeliever now.'

CHAPTER VII

MR. VINCENT looked at Margaret two or three times as they drove down to Chelsea Embankment. A village dressmaker had made her frock, but it hung well on her slim young figure, and the lace at her neck was soft and real; it belonged to her mother, who knew nothing of its value; her hat was perfectly simple; a peasant, or a woman of fashion might have worn it, and it seemed to him that Margaret would fall quite naturally into place with either. Then he thought of his wife at the farm; she had lived so simple a life among the growths of the earth and the changes of the sky that she was wholly untainted by the vulgarities of the world, and such as she was herself she had made her daughter.

The hansom stopped before a new-looking red-brick house.

'George Stringer would say it ought to be blown up with gunpowder,' Mr. Vincent remarked, and Margaret, turning to give some trivial answer, saw that he was white and nervous.

The door was opened by a manservant. The

hall was panelled; there were rugs and pictures and palms and old china about, and her heart beat quicker, for all this was part of the London show. The drawing-room was part of it, too, with its couches and screens, its pictures and Venetian glass and countless things of a sort that had no place at Woodside Farm. And it was still and dim, almost mysterious, and scented with early spring flowers put about in masses, or so it seemed to Margaret.

Some curtains separated a further room; they were drawn together, and against them, clutching them with one hand, as if she were waiting and half afraid, a woman stood. She was tall, and about forty-three. Her figure was still slight, her black dress trailed on the floor, and made her look graceful; the white cuffs at her wrist were turned back, and called attention to the small white hands below them. She had a quantity of dark hair, smoothly plaited, and pinned closely to the back of her head. Her eyes were a deep grey, long lashed, and curiously full of expression, that apparently she was not able to control. They seemed to belong to an inward being who looked on independently at things, and frequently thought and felt differently from the one that clothed it and tried to pass itself off as a real personality. She had never been pretty; but her face arrested attention. The lines on it suggested *suffering, there* was humour about the mouth,

and tenderness in the deep tone of her voice. For a time and for some people she had a curious fascination; she knew it, and liked to watch its effect. Her head was small, and she carried it well, and the whiteness of the little ruffle round her throat gave it a setting and made it picturesque. She looked across quickly at Mr. Vincent. Then, as if she had gathered courage, she held out her hands and went forward.

'Gerald!' she exclaimed. Her voice appeared to be thickened by emotion. She stopped before him and let her hands drop.

He took them in his. 'How do you do, Hilda?' he said, prosaically enough. 'It is a long time since we met.'

She raised her eyes; they were grave and pathetic, but somewhere at the back of them there was a glint of curiosity. She knew that he saw it, and tried to convince him that he was mistaken.

'More than twenty years,' she answered. 'I never expected to see you again.'

'And now I have brought this tall girl to see you.' He put his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

Mrs. Lakeman looked up curiously, almost ruefully. With something like a sob she whispered, 'It's Margaret, isn't it?' and took her in her arms and kissed her. 'I knew your father before your mother did, and I have loved him all my life,' she said, and looked at the girl's face intently

for a moment; then, as if she had had enough of that phase, she asked with a sudden touch of cynicism, 'Did he ever talk to you about me—but I don't suppose he did?'

'I was never a very talkative person,' Mr. Vincent said grimly. She turned to him with a happy, humorous smile. She seemed to have swept all emotion from her; she had become animated and even lively.

'No, you never were. You were always as silent and as wise as a dear owl. I have a child, too,' she went on. 'You must see her, my Lena. She is all I have in the world—a splendid girl, and a wonderful companion.'

'Where is she?' Mr. Vincent asked.

'She is in there,' nodding towards the curtains, 'in her own sitting-room. You shall go to her, dear,' she said, quickly turning to Margaret. 'She knows all about you, and is longing to see you. Tom Carringford is there too—he is always there,' she added significantly. 'You remember old Tom Carringford, Gerald? This is his boy, awfully nice boy; I am never tired of him.' She was gay by this time, and it was obvious that good spirits were natural to her. 'I'll tell you who is with them,' she went on. 'Dawson Farley—I dare say Margaret would like to see him. He is a genius, in my opinion—the only man on the stage fit to play a romantic part. And Louise Hunstan, the American actress, you

know: she is playing just now in *The School for Scandal* at the Shaftesbury—great fun to hear her do Lady Teazle with a little twang in her voice; it is an awfully pretty twang, though. We are devoted to the theatre, Lena and I.' She appeared to be hurrying as much information as possible into her words, as if she wanted to give her listeners an impression of her life.

'We are going to the play to-night,' Mr. Vincent said, but Mrs. Lakeman hardly heard him. Other lives only interested her so far as they affected her own. If the Vincents had been going with her she would have taken any trouble, shown any amount of excitement; but as it was, why, it was nothing to her.

'You shall go to them,' she said decisively to Margaret, evidently carrying on her own train of thought. She went towards the curtains as if to pull them aside. 'Tell them we are coming in ten minutes, dear.'

'Oh, but I don't know them,' Margaret answered, appalled at being told to rush in among strangers.

'Of course you don't,' Mrs. Lakeman said in a sympathetic voice. 'I 'll take you—no, Gerald, not you,—not yet,' she added quickly, as he made a step to follow them. She looked up at him, a long, long look into his eyes. It embarrassed him a little, but he showed no sign of it; he looked back at her half surprised, half inquiringly. 'We

must have a little talk together before we go to them.'

'Yes,' he agreed reluctantly. 'Though I don't know that we have anything to say'—he turned to a picture and stood before it.

Mrs. Lakeman led Margaret into a second drawing-room, and beyond it into a still smaller room. There were pictures, and flowers again, quantities of flowers, the air was heavy with their scent. Silk draperies shaded the light that struggled through the small-paned windows, and bits of colour and silver gleamed everywhere. It was like entering a dream, and dim figures seemed to rise from it—an indefinite number of them, it seemed to Margaret, though she soon made out that there were only four. She felt so strange as she stood hesitating just inside the room, like a little wayfarer, who knew only of green fields and a farm house, straying into an unknown world, for it was odd how the remembrance of her home never left her through all those first hours in London, and in her thoughts she sent it messages.

'Lena, my darling, this is Margaret Vincent. Be kind to her,' Mrs. Lakeman said in a low thrilling voice. 'You must love her, for I used to love her father—I do now.' She turned to a young man who had come towards them. 'Tom, your father knew this girl's father, too. I am coming back with him in a few minutes to tea. This is Tom Carringford, dear,' she said to

Margaret, and then, as if she had done enough, she went back with a look of amusement in her eyes, and a gay little smile on her lips. 'I have got rid of the girl,' she thought. 'I wonder what that old idiot will have to say for himself now she is out of the way.'

Tom Carringford reassured Margaret in a moment. 'How do you do?' he said, and shook her hand. 'Don't be afraid of us; it 's all right. My governor often spoke of yours, and I have always hoped I should see him some day.'

Before she could answer, there stole towards her a girl with a thin almost haggard face and two sleepy dark eyes that looked as if they might burn with every sort of passion. 'I have been waiting for you,' she said. 'Mother has told me about your father. It was splendid of him to bring you.' She spoke in a low tone, and, drawing Margaret to a seat near the window, looked at her with an anxious expression in her great eyes, as if she had been worn out with watching for her. 'Stay, you don't know Mr. Dawson Farley yet, do you?' She turned towards a man who had risen to make room for them.

'Mrs. Lakeman told us about him just now.'

'I 'm not as famous as Miss Lakeman thinks.' The clear pronunciation caught Margaret's ear, and she looked at him. He was clean-shaven, with a determined mouth and short crisp hair. There was something hard and even cruel in the

face, but there was fascination in it too—there was fascination in all these new people; the magnetism of knowledge of the world perhaps, the world that had only burst upon her to-day.

'Oh, but I know nothing,' she said shyly. 'I came from Chidhurst this morning—for the first time.' Lena made a little sympathetic sound, and put her arms out as if to protect her.

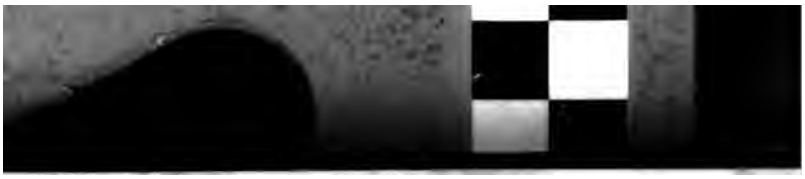
'Do you mean that you have never been in London before?' Mr. Farley asked.

'No, never.'

'What a wonderful thing!' The words came from a corner near the fire-place. Margaret was getting used to the dimness now, and could see through it. A woman moved towards her; she was not very young, but she was fair and graceful.

'It is Louise Hunstan, dear,' Lena said. For some reason she did not know, Margaret recoiled from this girl who had only known her five minutes, yet called her 'dear' and was affectionate in her manner.

'You must let me look at you,' Miss Hunstan said. The twang of which Mrs. Lakeman had spoken was faintly evident, but it gave her words a charm that made it impossible not to listen to them. 'Now tell me, do you love it or hate it, or are you just bewildered with this great London?' She seemed to understand the stranger-mood better than the others.



'I think I am bewildered,' Margaret answered. 'Everything is so strange.'

'Of course it is,' Tom Carringford said, 'and we stare at her as if she were a curiosity. What brutes we are! Never mind, Miss Vincent,' he laughed, 'we mean well, so you might tell us your adventures before Mrs. Lakeman returns.'

He gave her courage again, and a sense of safety. She laughed back a little as she answered. 'Adventures — do people have adventures in London? It sounds like Dick Whittington.'

'Just like Dick Whittington,' Lena answered. 'You ought to carry a cat under your arm and marry a fairy prince. Isn't she beautiful?' she whispered to Dawson Farley.

The colour rushed to Margaret's face. 'Oh, please don't,' she said. 'I'm not a bit beautiful.'

'Where have you come from, Miss Vincent?' the actor asked, as if he had not heard.

'From Woodside Farm at Chidhurst.'

'I can tell you all about her,' Lena said. 'My mother was once engaged to her father, Gerald Vincent.' Margaret turned quickly as if to stop her. But she took no notice and went on: 'He was a clergyman then, but he changed his opinions, left the Church, and wrote some articles that made a sensation. All his relations were furious, and mother couldn't marry him.' Then a little cry came from Margaret.

'Oh! How could she tell you?' she exclaimed.

'You oughtn't to have told us, anyhow,' Tom Carringford said, turning upon Lena: he was almost distressed. 'It 's an awful shame!'

'Miss Lakeman doesn't mean any harm—she 's not like any one else,' Miss Hunstan said to Margaret, with a look in her eyes that counted for more than her words.

'It 's history, dear—everybody knows it,' Lena cooed soothingly. 'Besides I always tell everything I know, about myself and every one else. It 's much the best way; then one doesn't get any shocks in life, and isn't told any secrets.'

'There 's something in that,' Mr. Farley agreed, and then he turned to Margaret; 'I have read some of Mr. Vincent's articles. They are beyond my depth, but I recognised their brilliance.'

'You see?' Lena said, with a shrug that implied it was impossible to cover up the history of a famous person.

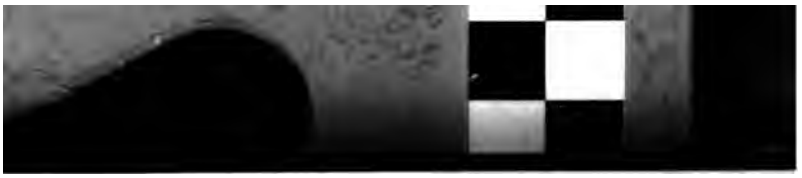
Mr. Farley turned away impatiently, and looked at Margaret: it was odd how different from themselves they all felt her to be.

'Are you going to any theatres?' he asked, trying to change the conversation. 'There are all sorts of things to see in London.'

'We are going to *King John* to-night.'

'Mr. Shakespeare and rather slow,' Tom Carringford put in gaily.

'Ah, that 's what you young men think,' Mr. Farley said—he himself was under forty.



'Tell me what you do in the country, little Margaret,' Lena asked, with the air of a culprit who loved her, and ignoring the fact that Margaret was a good five foot seven. 'Do you bask in the sun all the summer, and hide beneath the snow all the winter, or do you behave like ordinary mortals?'

'We behave like ordinary mortals. Father and I read a great many books——' she began.

'And what does your mother do?'

'Mother and Hannah are generally busy with the farm and the house.'

'Who is Hannah?'

'My half-sister. She is a good deal older than I am.'

'Can't you see it all?' Lena said, turning to the others. 'I can, as clearly as possible. Mrs. Vincent and Hannah look after the farm, and Margaret and her father sit together and read books. The farm carts rumble by, dogs bark, and chickens wander about, there are cows in the fields, honeysuckle in the hedges, and bees in the hives at the end of the garden. In my thoughts I can see them all jumbled up together, and hear the notes of the thrushes in the trees.'

'Rubbish!' said Tom Carringford. 'Your talk is a little too picturesque, you know. It always is. I can't think how you manage to invent it so quickly.'

'Are you eager now that you have come into

the world?' Lena asked, taking no notice of Tom's crushing remark. 'Do you long to run all over it, and feel as if you could eat it up?'

'Rubbish!' said Tom again. 'She doesn't feel anything of the sort.'

'Everybody does who is really alive.'

'All right,' he said imperturbably; 'I am a babe unborn, or a mummy.' Then he turned to Margaret: 'I have to go now; but I wish I had seen your father, Miss Vincent. Where are you staying?'

'At the Langham Hotel—it 's in Regent Street.'

'Oh, yes, we know; we have been in London for some time, you see,' Mr. Farley laughed. He liked this girl; she was fresh and unspoilt, he thought. He had a curious hatred of Lena Lakeman, which had just been intensified by her treatment of Margaret. There were times when he felt that he should like to strangle her, just for the good of the community. He hated her wriggling movements, her low tones, her sugary manner, and the outrageous things she said and did with an air of unconsciousness.

Tom Carringford stood talking with Miss Hunstan before he departed. They appeared to be making some arrangement together, for, as he wished her good-bye he said, 'All right, then; I will if I can. Anyhow, may I look in at tea-time to-morrow?'

'You may look in at any time you like,' Miss

Hunstan said, and then she explained to Margaret: 'Mr. Carringford and I are old friends, and always have a great deal to say to each other.' She got up when he had gone. 'I'm going, too,' she said; 'but I wish I could stay longer:' She held out her hand to Margaret. 'I am a stranger to you,' she said; 'but I should like you to know that I am an American woman, and an actress, who was once a stranger, too, here in London. I hope to stay for some time, and if you come up again and would come and see me, either at the theatre or at my home, I'd be more glad than I can say, for you remind me of a girl I knew in Philadelphia, and she was the sweetest thing on earth.'

'I should like it—so very much,' Margaret said gratefully.

'Write to me first if you can, for I wouldn't like to miss you. Anyway just remember that I live in Great College Street, Westminster; and you will easily find it, for it's quite near the Abbey. No, thank you, Miss Lakeman, I won't stay for tea. Good-bye.'

'I'll walk with you, Louise,' Mr. Farley said. 'Miss Hunstan is an old friend of mine, too,' he told Margaret. 'We knew each other in America.'

Then, when they were alone, Lena went up to Margaret. 'I am glad they are gone,' she said. 'Now we shall understand each other so much

better, and you must tell me'—she stopped to ring the bell—'all about yourself. We ought to know each other, when we remember——' She had been speaking in an intense tone, but the servant entered, and in quite an ordinary one she asked for tea to be brought at once; then turned and immediately resumed the intensity—'when we remember that your father and my mother were lovers.'

'Oh, don't say that,' Margaret answered almost vehemently, but with a sweetness of which her listener was uneasily sensible. 'It was all finished and done with before we were born. I couldn't bear you to speak of it, nor of my father's opinions, as you did when the others were here; and I can't now, for we have only known each other an hour. There are some things we should only say to those who are nearest to us, and very seldom even then.'

Lena wriggled a little closer. 'You beautiful thing! Imagine your knowing that. But don't you know that some people are never strangers? And when mother brought you in just now I felt that I had known you for years. You must love mother and me, Margaret. People always do; we understand so well.'

'You don't—you can't—or you would not have spoken as you did before those strangers.'

'Didn't you hear what I said? I am one of those people who think that everything we do

and feel should be spread out under the light of Heaven. There should be no dark corners or secret places in our lives.'

'But why did you say that my father and your mother were lovers once? I didn't want to know that he had ever cared for any one but my own dear mother.' Margaret was indignant still.

Lena looked at her with a bewildered smile. 'How sweet you are, and how unspoilt by the world!' she said. 'I wish I could come and live on your farm, dear. Tell me about your mother.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I shouldn't like to talk about her to any one I don't know.'

'Do you love her very much?'

'I love her with all my heart. That is why——'

'Tell me what she is like.'

'I can't. I don't want to talk about her to you.'

'Do you feel that I am not worthy?' Lena asked, with a gleam of amusement in her eyes.

'I don't think you worthy or unworthy,' Margaret answered; 'but I don't want to talk about her to you.'

'You are very curious, little Margaret. I am glad we have met.' Lena leaned forward, as if she were trying to dive into the innermost depths

of the soul before her, but Margaret felt half afraid of her, as of something uncanny.

'I don't think I am glad,' she whispered, and shuddered.

'But you mustn't struggle against me, dear—you can't,' she whispered back; 'because I understand people—mother and I do. The tea is ready, I will go and bring your father here.' She rose and slipped softly through the curtains.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. LAKEMAN looked at her old lover triumphantly. 'I felt,' she said, 'that I must have you to myself for a little while. I couldn't bear the presence even of that dear child.' Her listener fidgeted a little but said nothing. 'Gerald,' her voice trembled, but in the tail of her eye there lurked amusement, 'have you hated me all these years?'

'No. Why should I? You did what you thought was right, and so did I.' There was a shade of impatience in his manner, though it was fairly polite.

She felt in an instant that tragedy would be thrown away upon him; she changed her note and tried a suspicion of comedy. 'I would have stuck to you through anything else,' she said, with a shake of her head and a smile that she meant to be pathetic. 'I would have gone to perdition for you with pleasure—in this world.'

'Quite so.'

'I often think you people who do away with the next get a great pull over us. You see it's going to be such a long business by all accounts.'

'Yes.' He looked bored: this sort of joke did not amuse him.

'I couldn't help myself. I couldn't break my father's heart and bring a scandal on the diocese; I was obliged to do what I did,' she said, with a touch of vehemence.

'Of course I quite understand that,' he answered; 'and, to be frank, I think it would be better not to discuss it any more.'

'You will always be dear to me,' she went on as if she had not heard him, 'and when Cyril told me you were at Chidhurst, I felt that I must write and ask you to come and see me. I nearly took a house there but it fell through.' Mr. Vincent remembered Sir George Stringer's remark, and said nothing. 'Perhaps I should have been more eager if I had known—and yet I don't think I could have borne it; I don't think I could have spent a summer there with you and—and—your wife,'—she stopped, as if the last word were full of tragedy, and repeated in a lower tone, 'with you and your wife only a mile off. I couldn't bear to see her,' and quite suddenly she burst into tears.

Mr. Vincent looked at her awkwardly. She meant him to soothe her, to say something regretful; perhaps to kiss her if he still knew how—she doubted it. But he made no sign, he sat quite still, while she thought him a fool for his pains. After a moment's silence he put out his hand and touched her arm.

'It's a good thing you didn't take the house, then,' he said, and that was all.

She brushed her tears away, and wondered for a moment what to do with this wooden man who seemed incapable of response to any interesting mood of hers.

'Tell me what she is like,' she half whispered.

He considered for a moment. 'I don't think I am good at describing people,' he said in quite an ordinary tone.

'I imagine her'—she stopped, as though she were trying to keep back just the ghost of a mocking tone that would come into her voice, 'a dear good useful creature, a clever managing woman who looks after everything, and makes you thoroughly comfortable.'

'I believe I am pretty comfortable,' he answered thoughtfully.

'Oh! and do you help with the farm?' she asked, with a possibility of contempt—it depended on his answer.

'No, I fear I don't do that. I leave it to her and to Hannah. Hannah is her daughter by her first husband.'

'I dare say he was very different from you,' and her lip curled.

'I don't know whether he was or not—I never saw him.' His manner was beginning to be impatient again.

'Tell me one thing more,' she said, after a

moment's hesitation; 'do you love her very much?'

He looked at her almost resentfully. 'I fail to see your right to ask that question, but, since you have done so, I will certainly tell you that I care for her more than I do for any other woman in the world.'

'Gerald!' she cried, and burst into tears again. 'I feel that you have never forgiven me, that you will always despise me.'

'This is nonsense,' he said; 'and I don't understand what you are driving at. We broke off with each other years ago. You married another man and presumably you were very happy with him. I married another woman and am very happy with her, and there is nothing more to be said.'

She got up and stood with her back to the dull smouldering fire; it had been allowed to get low, for the day had been like a summer one.

'Just like you men,' she exclaimed with a little laugh, and a sudden change of manner. 'You are curious creatures; sometimes I wonder if you are anything more than superior animals. Shake hands, old boy, and let us be friends. We are middle-aged people both of us. Look at my grey hair.' She bent her head almost gaily, and put her finger along a narrow line; 'rather too late for sentiment, isn't it?'

'Yes, I think it is.' He was surprised, but

distinctly relieved. 'Now perhaps you 'll tell me when it was that Cyril wrote to you?'

'About two months ago. Poor old chap, his marriage wasn't up to much—ei—ther,' she checked the last word and finished it with a gasp. 'Awful pity, you know, to marry a woman from a music hall. Lucky they haven't any children, isn't it?'

'Perhaps it is, on the whole.'

'I don't like the account of his health, it sounds as if he is in a bad way.'

'I 'm afraid he is,' Mr. Vincent assented reluctantly; and then he added slowly, for he always disliked making any statement concerning himself, 'I shall probably go out to him.'

'I knew you would,' she cried, with a little glow of approval. But he was unresponsive to this too. 'Of course, if anything happened the title would come to you?'

He looked up with quick indignation. But before he could speak the curtain was drawn and Lena appeared.

'Are you coming to tea?' she asked, taking them both in with a long look. 'That sweet thing you brought to me just now and I are waiting for you.' She went up to Mr. Vincent and held out her hand. 'I have heard so much of you,' she said with perfect self-possession, 'and often wished to see you.' She opened her

large dark eyes as if to show that they were full of appreciation.

'This is your daughter, I suppose?' he asked her mother.

The question was so like Gerald, Mrs. Lakeman thought; he always made sure of even his most trivial facts.

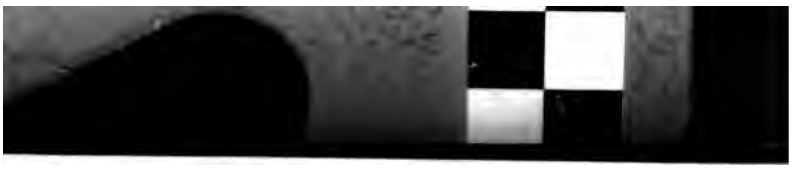
'Yes, this is my daughter—my ewe lamb, my Lena.' She put her arm round Lena's shoulders, and once more there was a thrill in her voice; but still he failed to respond. He looked at them both with a little embarrassment, dramatic situations were beyond him, and he had not the faintest notion what to do next.

Mrs. Lakeman smiled inwardly. The man was a perfect idiot, she thought. 'Go, darling,' she said, 'we are coming.'

Lena gave Mr. Vincent another of her intense looks as she turned away. 'Do come,' she said; 'I am longing to hear you talk.'

'It 's very kind of you, but I don't know that I have anything to say.' The suspicion of patronage in her manner amused him, but it irritated him too, and he wanted to get out of the house. Mrs. Lakeman made a step towards the curtains through which her daughter disappeared, then stopped, and, as if with a last great effort she had gathered courage, said, 'tell me one thing—is Margaret like her mother?'

He considered for a moment before he answered.



'I think she is,' he said slowly. 'She has the same eyes and mouth, and the same distinction of carriage.'

'Oh!' The exclamation was almost ironical. Then they went to the dim room with the overpowering scent of flowers. Lena was making tea, while Margaret surveyed the arrangements with great interest. They were so different from any she had seen before. At Woodside Farm a cloth was spread over the oak table in the middle of the room, a loaf and a large pat of butter, a substantial cake, jam, and such other things as might help to make a serviceable meal were set out. Occasionally a savoury dish of ham and eggs appeared, or of chicken, fried in batter, of which the cooking was a matter of pride to Hannah; plates and knives were put round for each person, and chairs drawn up; altogether it was a much more businesslike but far less elegant affair than this dainty one over which Lena presided.

'Good-bye, Margaret dear,' Mrs. Lakeman said to her ten minutes later; 'you don't know what it has been to me to see you,' and she kissed her on either cheek. 'You must come and stay with us some day. Gerald, you will let her come, won't you?'

'Certainly, if she wishes it.'

'She and Lena must be friends; our children ought to be friends. And you and I,' she said

with deeper feeling in her voice, 'must not lose sight of each other again.'

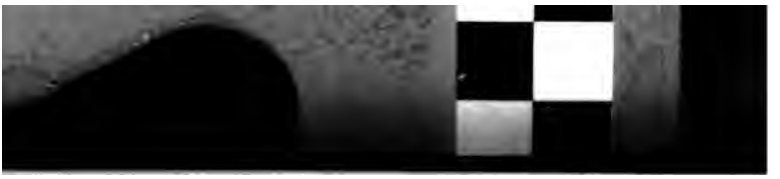
'Of course not,' he answered, and this time he managed to look at her with his old smile, in which there had always been a charm. It went to her heart and made her a natural woman; with something like a sigh she watched him as he descended the stairs.

'I could love him now,' she thought, 'and go to the devil for him too, with all the pleasure in the world. But he's so abominably good that he will probably be faithful to his farmer woman till the breath is out of his body.'

'Well, would you like to go and stay there some day?' Mr. Vincent asked Margaret.

'No,' she answered quickly, and then she added reluctantly, and because she couldn't help it: 'I don't know why it is, father, but I feel as if I never wanted to go there again.'

'That's right,' he said. What the answer meant she didn't quite understand, but she rubbed her shoulder against his in sheer sympathy. A hansom gives little scope for variety in caresses, but this did well enough.



CHAPTER IX

AT ten o'clock next morning Tom Carringford appeared at the Langham.

'Miss Vincent said you were staying here, so I made bold to come,' he explained with a boyish frankness that immediately won over Mr. Vincent. 'Please forgive me, and don't think it awfully cool of me to come so early. I was afraid I should miss you if I waited.'

'I'm very glad to see you,' Mr. Vincent said. 'I knew your father well.' And in a moment Tom was quite at his ease.

'What did you think of *King John*?' he asked Margaret.

'It was splendid; and a theatre is a wonderful place. How can people call it wicked?'

'Well, they don't,' he laughed, 'unless they are idiots, then they do perhaps,' at which she laughed too, and thought of Hannah. 'I expect the scenes with Arthur gave you a few bad moments, didn't they?' he asked.

'She wept,' her father said, evidently amused at the recollection.

'That's all right,' and Tom beamed with

satisfaction. She was a nice girl, he thought, so of course she wept: she ought to weep at seeing that sort of thing for the first time. Then he turned to Mr. Vincent. 'My father would be glad to think I had seen you at last,' he said; 'he often wondered why you never turned up.'

'I have not turned up anywhere for more than five-and-twenty years,' Mr. Vincent answered. 'If I had he would have seen me.' He was looking at Tom with downright pleasure, at his five foot eleven of growth, and broad shoulders, at his frank face and clear blue eyes. This was the sort of boy that a man would like to have for a son, he thought; and then, after a moment's characteristic hesitation, he said: 'Stringer told us that you went to Hindhead sometimes.'

'Often.' Tom's replies were usually short, and if possible guiltless of pronouns. 'Lovely country, you know. You are not far off, of course. I went over to Chidhurst last summer.'

'Perhaps one day you would get over again—and see us?'

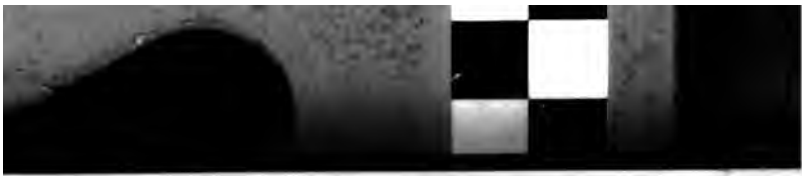
'Should like it,' said Tom heartily.

'You have left Oxford?'

'Oh, yes, last year.'

'Any ambitions?'

'Plenty. But I don't know whether they 'll come to anything. I believe there 'll be an unpaid under-secretaryship presently; by and by I hope to get into the House. Politics are rather low



down, you know, Miss Vincent, so they 'll suit me. What did you think of Miss Hunstan? I saw her last night; she had fallen in love with you.'

'Had she?' Margaret exclaimed joyfully. 'I 'm so glad. I loved her, though I only saw her for a moment.'

'I 'll tell her so. Every one does, my mother was devoted to her; that 's one reason why I am. She 's great fun, too, though of course she 's getting on a bit,' he added with the splendid insolence of youth. 'There 's something more at the back of this visit,' and he looked at Mr. Vincent; 'I have been wondering if you are really going to-day?'

'By the 2.50 from Waterloo, we can't stay any longer.'

'Well—I know this is daring; but couldn't you both come and lunch with me? I have my father's little house in Stratton Street, and should like to think you had been there. It would be very good of you.'

Mr. Vincent shook his head. 'No time.'

'You 'll have to lunch somewhere,' Tom pleaded.

'Yes, but I must go to my lawyer's almost immediately, and one or two other places——'

'Are you going alone?'

'Yes.'

'Then look here,' Tom exclaimed, delighted at his own audacity, 'if you are going to lawyers and people, couldn't I take Miss Vincent round and

show her something? Picture Galleries, Tower of London, British Museum, Houses of Parliament, top of the Monument—that kind of thing, you know. We'd take a hansom, and put half London into a couple of hours.'

'Could I, father, could I?' she asked eagerly.

Mr. Vincent looked from one to the other. They were boy and girl, he thought; Tom was twenty-two and Margaret eighteen, a couple of wild children, and, before either of them was born, their fathers had been old friends. Why shouldn't they go out together?

'It's very kind of you,' he said, 'and it would prevent her from spending a dull morning.'

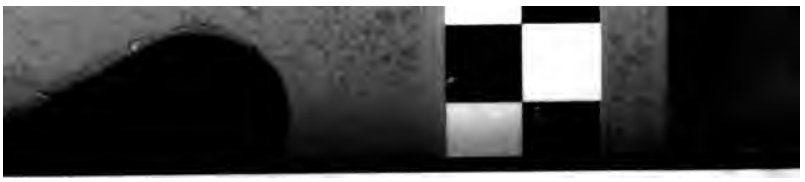
'It shan't be dull if I can help it,' Tom answered triumphantly.

'I may really go?' Margaret cried. 'Oh, father, you are a dear.'

She was a dear, too, Tom thought, and so was the old man, as he described Mr. Vincent in his thoughts.

The 'old man' had an idea of his own. 'Bring Margaret back here and lunch with us,' he said, 'there might be just time enough for that: we will go and see you on another occasion.'

'Good—good!' And Margaret presently found out that this was his favourite expression. 'It shall be as you say. Now, Miss Vincent, there's hard work before us.' Five minutes later Mr. Vincent watched them start, they waved their



hands to him from the hansom, and he turned away with a smile.

'The real thing to do,' Tom told Margaret, was to see the great green spaces in the midst of a wonderful city, and the chestnuts which in another month would be in bloom in Hyde Park, 'and then there is the Round Pond and the Serpentine. But, as after all,' he went on, 'you probably have trees and ponds at Chidhurst, we'll begin by going to St. Paul's. I'm afraid, seeing the limited time at our disposal, that the Tower and the Monument must do without us.' A brilliant thought struck him as they were driving down the Strand from St. Paul's to the Houses of Parliament. 'We'll take Miss Hunstan a stack of flowers from Covent Garden—you must see that, of course. Hi! Cabby, turn up here—Covent Garden, we want to get some flowers.'

'Oh, but I've brought no money with me.'

'I have—heaps,' he laughed, delighted at her innocence. 'I had an idea we might do something, you know. Now then, here we are. You must jump out, if you don't mind.'

They walked up and down the centre arcade looking in at the shops, as happy and as guileless as Adam and Eve in the first garden when the world was all their own. They chose a stack of flowers, as Tom called it—he filled Margaret's arms with them just for the pleasure of looking at her.

'You make quite a picture loaded with them,' he said. 'Look here, I want to give you some roses—if you will have them?' He said it almost humbly. 'We get them in London, you see, before you do in the country; and I want you to take some back with you.'

'I should like to take my mother some,' she answered, quite unconscious of course of their value.

'Good! You shall take her a heap from us both—I should like to send her some too, if I may. But they shall meet you at Waterloo in a box, then they'll be fresh at the last moment.'

Margaret felt as they drove on again, as if she had found a playfellow, a comrade, some one who made life a wholly different thing. She had never been on equal terms with any one young before—with any one at all who laughed and chattered and looked at the world from the same standpoint as she felt that she and Tom did, though till yesterday she had not set eyes on him. It was a new delight that the world had suddenly sprung upon her. This was what it was like to be a boy and girl together, to have a brother, to have friends, what it would be like if some day in the future she were married: people went about then laughing and talking and delighting in being together. Oh, that wonderful word 'together'!

'We won't go to the Abbey,' Tom said,

'because you did that yesterday, and before we inspect the House of Commons——'

'Some day you will be there!'

'Some day I shall be there,' he echoed, 'but before I show you the identical seat in which it is my ambition to sit, we 'll get rid of these flowers. Great College Street is here, just round the corner. I wonder if she 's at home. Jolly little street, isn't it, with its low houses on one side and the old wall on the other?'

'And the trees looking over——'

'Here we are.'

He flew out and knocked at the door. It was opened by a grey-haired woman, middle-aged, and with a kindly face, overmuch wrinkled for her years. Miss Hunstan had gone to rehearsal, she said.

'Oh—what a bore,' Tom was crestfallen. Then a happy thought struck him. 'Look here, Mrs. Gilman, we have brought her some flowers. Will you let us come and stuff them into her pots?'

'To be sure,' she answered. 'I 'll get you some water at once,' and she made off, leaving the street door open.

'Come in,' he cried to Margaret, 'Mrs. Gilman knows me, and she 'll let us arrange them.' The hall of the little old-fashioned house was panelled like Mrs. Lakeman's, but it was very narrow and painted white, and there were no fripperies about. Miss Hunstan's sitting-room was on the ground-

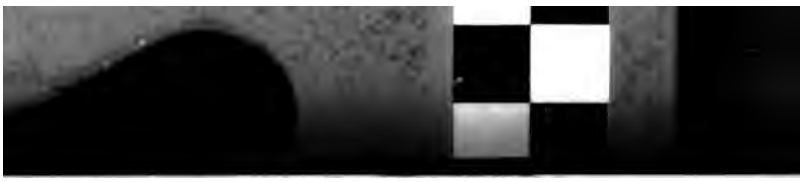
floor; it was small, and the walls matched the panelling outside it. The two windows went up high, and let in the light and the bygone centuries from over the way. In front of them were muslin curtains, fresh and white, with frills to their edges. There were brass sconces in the wall with candles and blue silk shades, but the reading lamp on the table suggested that they were seldom used. On one side of the fireplace was a writing-table covered with papers, and over it a bookshelf; here and there a photograph, above the mantelpiece an autotype of the Sistine Madonna in a dark brown frame, and beneath it, filled with white flowers, was a vase of cheap green pottery; there were other pots of the same ware about the room, but they were all empty.

'We 'll fill them,' Tom said gaily.

Margaret looked at their handiwork with delight. 'I like doing this,' she said. 'But it seems such an odd thing to be here in a stranger's room among the things that help to make up a life—and the stranger absent.'

He looked at her for a moment. 'Somehow she isn't a stranger,' he answered. 'Lots of people are strangers, no matter how long you know 'em, but she isn't, even at the beginning, if she likes you. Let 's put these daffodils into this thing, shall we?'

'They look as if they were growing out of the green earth,' she said; 'pots should always be



green, don't you think so, or else clear glass, like water?'

'Good!' he exclaimed, and went on cramming in the flowers. At last there were only the pale white roses left.

'We'll put them here.' Margaret set down the pot by the photograph of a thin, sweet-looking woman on the left of the writing-table.

'That's her mother,' Tom said, half tenderly; Margaret pushed the roses nearer to it, and loved him for his tone. Then when all the flowers were placed about the little blue and white room, and the freshness of spring was its own, they laughed again like the light-hearted children they were, and went out to their cab.

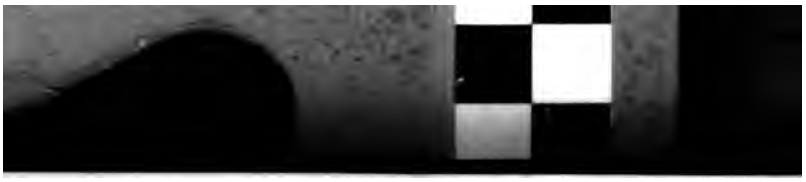
'Good-bye, Mrs. Gilman,' Tom cried, as he closed the doors. 'Tell Miss Hunstan it was us—Miss Vincent and I, and that we left her our blessing. I dare say she'll write to you,' he said, turning to Margaret—'it was all you, I shall tell her.'

'Write to me? Oh no! I wish she would, I would give anything to have a letter from her.' Her face flushed even at the thought of one.

'You will, she'll write to-morrow,' he said, with gay authority. Then they drove away triumphantly.

CHAPTER X

THE brown cart was waiting at the station, a successor to the heavy one of former days, lighter and better built, and the cob—a new cob—hurried along with it as though it were a cockle shell. Hannah was not there, only the boy who went out with the milk in the morning. He sat up behind and took care of the luggage, while Mr. Vincent drove with his daughter beside him, contented and happy. The visit to London had drawn them closer together. To Margaret it had been a strange looking back, for she had hardly realised till now that her father must have had a history before the day he entered the farm gates and saw her mother for the first time. She had heard Hannah speak of it—the coming of the stranger, as it had remained in Hannah's mind through all the years afterwards. She thought, too, of her grandfather and uncle, the relations of whom she had known nothing when she started yesterday. She was glad they had been people of position, even though they had spent their money or had done undesirable things, as something in her father's manner seemed to



imply, for it made her father's life appear a more important thing, not to her, but in the world, that might otherwise have thought it merely one of the details of the farm at Chidhurst. She looked at the moor as they drove beside it. The clumps of broom and gorse had come out since yesterday full and golden in the sunshine. The fresh green of the whortleberries was showing itself, the bell heather was struggling into bloom; just so the possibilities of life had broken into her imagination, and if some struck her with wonder there were others that filled her with joy. An unreasonable, undefinable happiness that could not be put into words rose to her heart, when she thought of Tom Carringford. She could hear his laughter still, and his merry talk as they made a bower of Miss Hunstan's room; she wanted to see him again already, and something told her that he wanted to see her.

The farmyard gates were wide open, it was good to see the corner of the Dutch garden again, and in the porch, just as Margaret had known she would be, her mother stood waiting. Mr. Vincent took his wife's hand without a word, and looked into her face with a little smile.

'We have come home,' he said. She gave him her hand for a moment, then turned to Margaret, who saw with surprise that she was smarter than usual. She wore her grey cashmere and the brooch with the topaz in it, and one of her best

hem-stitched handkerchiefs was pushed into the front of her dress. A smile came to her lips as she answered the question in Margaret's eyes.

'Hannah didn't go to the station,' she said, 'for Mr. Garratt came over this afternoon. Tea has been ready this hour and more, but we waited for you.'

A fresh cloth was on the table in the living-room, there was a vase of flowers in the middle, the best china was put out, and fresh cooked scones and other good things were visible. Near the fireplace stood Hannah, looking a little defiant and rather shamefaced. Margaret noticed that her hair was brushed back tighter than ever and shone more than usual. At her neck was a bow of muslin and lace, of which she seemed uncomfortably conscious. Beside her, brisk and businesslike, with a happy, self-satisfied expression on his face, stood a youthful-looking man of eight-and-twenty. He was fair and had a smart air with him. His hair was carefully parted in the middle and curled a little at the tips. He had a small moustache which he stroked a great deal and pulled back towards his ears. He wore a cutaway coat and a navy-blue tie with white spots on it; a gold watch chain wandered over his waistcoat. Margaret saw in a moment that he was altogether different from the men who were her father's friends; from Mr. Carringford, for instance, or Sir George Stringer, with whom she

had felt natural and at home. There was something about this man that made her haughty and on the defensive even before she had spoken to him.

'Your train must have been late. Tea 's been waiting this long time,' Hannah said. 'However, it 's to be hoped you 've enjoyed yourselves.' Her manner was quite amiable, but a little confused, as was only to be expected.

'This is Mr. Garratt,' Mrs. Vincent said, 'you will like to meet him, father ; he has always known James's people at Petersfield.'

'How do you do, sir ? pleased to make your acquaintance, I 'm sure,' Mr. Garratt said. 'I hope you 've had a pleasant visit to London ? '

'How do you do ? ' Mr. Vincent answered, wondering whether this lively young man could really be in love with the sedate Hannah.

'And Miss Vincent, I 'm pleased to meet you,' Mr. Garratt went on in a genial tone. 'Have often heard of you, and hope you've enjoyed yourself since you've been away.'

'Yes, thank you,' Margaret answered distantly.

'I dare say you've come back ready for your tea.' This was by way of a little joke. 'There's nothing like a railway journey, with the country at the end of it, for starting an appetite,' to which she vouchsafed no reply, feeling instinctively that it would be wise to keep Mr. Garratt at a distance.

Then the business of tea was entered upon,

reflectively, and almost in silence, as was the custom at Woodside Farm. The silence puzzled Mr. Garratt a little, this being his first visit; he wondered if it were a compliment to himself and whether these quiet people were shy before him.

'Is there much doing in London?' he asked Mr. Vincent, thinking perhaps that he was expected to lead the conversation.

'I suppose so,' Mr. Vincent answered rather coldly.

'I always think myself that it does one good to go up. I dare say you find the same? Did you stay at one of the hotels in the Strand?'

'We stayed at the Langham.'

'It's rather swagger there, you know.' Mr. Garratt thought this would be a pleasing remark.

'It's very quiet,' Mr. Vincent said haughtily.

'Did you go anywhere, father?' Mrs. Vincent asked.

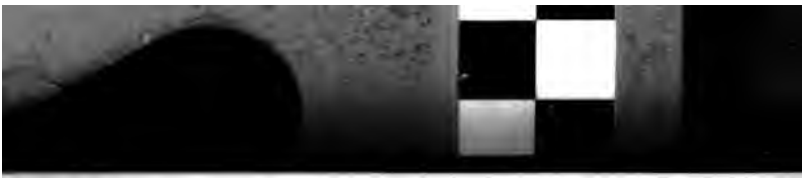
'Yes; we went to Westminster Abbey.'

'Magnificent building, Westminster Abbey,' Mr. Garratt put in. 'What did you think of it, Miss Vincent?'

'I don't think I could say just yet,' Margaret answered; 'it was only yesterday that I saw it.'

'Quite right, it doesn't do to make up one's mind too soon,' Mr. Garratt remarked cheerily, at which Hannah looked up a little sharply.

'For my part,' she said, 'I like people to know at once what they think, and what they mean.'



'Well, you see,' he answered, looking back at her, 'it isn't difficult sometimes.' Whereupon the colour came to her face and amiability to her expression. 'What else did you see in London, Miss Vincent?' he turned to Margaret again.

Something prompted Mr. Vincent to answer for her and with extreme gravity: 'We went to the theatre.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' Hannah said.

'And how did you like it?' Mr. Garratt asked Margaret, as if he had not heard Hannah's remark.

'It was wonderful,' she answered. 'I long to go again.'

'It's a place of iniquity,' Hannah said firmly.

Mr. Vincent looked across at her. A sharp answer rose to his lips, but he remembered that the Petersfield young man was a suitor, and had been long expected. Before he could speak Margaret struck in quickly:

'It was one of Shakespeare's plays that we saw.'

'I have read a good many of them,' Hannah answered, not in the least pacified.

'Then of course you are aware, Miss Barton, that they are mostly historical,' Mr. Garratt remarked in a conciliatory voice, 'and it may be said that to read him, or even to see him acted, makes us familiar with historical knowledge'; a sentence at which Mr. Vincent gave a little snort but said nothing.

Hannah was delighted at the prospect of an

argument. 'History may teach us some lessons, Mr. Garratt,' she said, 'but we can read them, just as we can read other lessons. There is no occasion to do more; and as for play-acting teaching us history, once people have taken to their graves they might be left to lie in them and not be brought out and used as puppets that dance to man's imagination.' Mr. Vincent looked up, he was becoming interested. 'Moreover,' continued Hannah, 'it's making a mock of God, for only He can bring the dead to life.'

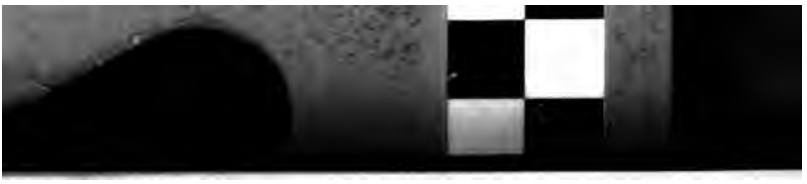
'What you say is very true, Miss Barton,' Mr. Garratt answered, sending another furtive look at Margaret, 'and I never think myself that Shakespeare is as interesting as a good modern piece.'

'Do you go to the theatre then, Mr. Garratt?' she asked, quickly putting down the teapot, but still keeping her hand on its handle.

'I don't make a practice of it, Miss Barton, but if one is in London one is tempted to do as London does. Moreover, I believe in seeing the world as it is, rather than in holding off because it is not as one wants it to be,' he added with the air of a moralist, but an obvious capacity for enjoyment lurking behind it.

'The world should be made a wilderness for the evil-doer——' Hannah began, as if she were trying to remember a bit from a sermon.

'There should be a voice crying in the wilderness, Miss Barton.' Mr. Garratt stopped, for it



occurred to him that he might be going too far.

'Or what would be the good of the wilderness?' Mr. Vincent asked. 'We have finished tea, I think?' He rose and went to the best parlour. The years he had spent out of the world, as he had once known it, made him a little intolerant of many things, of this vulgar and good-tempered young man with an eye to the main chance among them. But Mr. Garratt would do well enough for Hannah, in fact, nothing could be better, for evidently he was not narrow, and this might have a good effect upon her. For himself and his daughter and for his wife there was a different plane, a different point of view. The visit to London had made him see even more clearly than before the manner of woman he had married, and for the first time, after all these years and in the autumn of their days, he was nearly being her lover.

Just as if his thought had brought her to him she put her head inside the door and asked, as she always did:

'Are you busy, father, or shall I come to you for a little while?'

He got up and went to her. 'I wanted you,' he said. 'Come and sit by the window; there are a good many things to say.' She felt as if Heaven had flashed its joy into her heart; but only for a moment, then dread took its place.

'Is the news bad from London?'

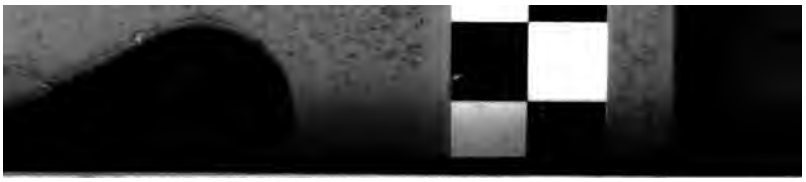
'It's not good,' he said. 'That is one reason why I want to talk to you, dear wife.' He stopped a moment before he went on. 'I have told you two or three times that you knew nothing about me or my people. Now that I shall probably be going away very soon and that Margaret is grown up, I think you ought to be told something about them—one can never tell what may happen. There is not much to their credit—or to mine—I fear,' he added, and then quite briefly he gave her the points of the family history, and made known to her the possibilities in the future. She was not elated,—he had known that she would not be; she was surprised, and a little offended.

'I didn't think there was this behind,' she said; 'I don't know what people will say.'

'Is there any occasion to tell them?'

'I don't suppose there is,' she answered absently, and then with an anxious look in her clear eyes she said the one thing that hurt him in all the years he knew her. 'Father, you didn't hold it back because you didn't think us good enough?'

He turned round quickly. 'If it was anything of that sort,' he answered, 'it was because I did not think myself good enough. My people led useless, extravagant lives, and my own has not been much better. I have felt ashamed that you



should know anything concerning us, and it wasn't necessary for our contentment here.'

'No,' she said slowly, 'it wasn't.'

'Nor is it any more necessary to tell people our affairs now than it has been hitherto. If Cyril dies I shall not alter my name—what good would a title be to me? I have no son to come after me, no one at all to inherit anything except Margaret, for whom this doesn't matter.'

'I'm glad you've told Margaret,' Mrs. Vincent answered. She was silent for a moment, and then went on thoughtfully: 'She is changing in herself, I can feel it. She'll not be content here always. She is stretching her wings already, like a young bird that is waiting to fly.'

'Well, at any rate, she had better stay quietly here till my return,' he said. 'By the way, an old friend of mine has taken the vicarage house—Sir George Stringer; he is sure to come over and see you.'

'We are getting very grand, father,' she said ruefully, resenting it a little in her heart. She had been so well content with her own station in life, and had never wished to see it either lifted or lowered; the first seemed undignified to her, the last would have meant humiliation.

'It doesn't make any difference, dear,' he said. 'We were a worthless, ramshackling set, who put such privileges as we had under our feet, and as for me, I haven't even enough grace to take me to

church on Sunday. I want to forget everything but the life of the last twenty years—you, and Margaret.'

She put her hands up almost shyly to his shoulders. 'Father,' she said, 'you will never know what you have been to me, never in this world.'

'I do,' he answered; 'I know—well.'

'And I couldn't bear that you should be anything but just what you have been always.'

'I never shall be anything else,' he answered, and his tone went to her heart and satisfied it. 'We won't tell Hannah about this,' he went on after a pause, 'and I don't suppose Margaret will. There 's no reason to make a mystery of it; if it comes out it doesn't matter, but if not we can be silent.'

'I'd rather she didn't know,' Mrs. Vincent answered, 'unless it happens that she must be told; she might be thinking things I wouldn't bear.'

Meanwhile Towsey and Hannah were clearing away the tea things: Margaret went out to the porch and looked at the garden and the beech-wood she loved rising high beyond it. Mr. Garratt cast a quick glance towards the kitchen, and in a moment he was by her side.

'Are you inclined for a little stroll, Miss Vincent?' His eyes said more than his words.

She went a step forward and stood by a lilac bush.

'No,' she answered distantly, 'I am going in directly.'

The sunset with a parting shaft of gold touched her hair; a whispering breeze carried a message from the roses to her cheek. And she was young—young, the dawn was in her eyes, she seemed to listen to the song of birds, to belong to the flowers that were springing from the earth, she was different altogether from Hannah. A dozen possibilities darted through his mind. His heart beat quicker, his usual ready speech failed him, he stood tugging at his moustache and thinking that he had never seen a girl like this before—but suddenly he was recalled to common-sense.

'Mr. Garratt!' Hannah walked firmly across the living-place to the porch, her voice was severe and unflinching; 'if you want to see the grave of your aunt Amelia, I am ready to take you.'

CHAPTER XI

MR. VINCENT started for Australia a week after his visit to London. In the first hours of his sailing Mrs. Vincent and Margaret measured in their hearts every length the ship took onwards. Hannah wondered whether the Lord would let it get safely to its journey's end, and prayed fervently for Jews, Turks, and infidels, and did not pretend to regret his departure. 'It will be good for him to be away,' she said to her mother, 'and it 's as well the place should be left for a bit to those whose hold was on it before he came and will be after he 's gone.'

There was no question of Hannah's supremacy after Mr. Vincent departed. Her mother was as wax in her hands. But it was not only for peace, and from a vague feeling that she owed Hannah an indefinite reparation for the fact that another man had been set in her father's place, that Mrs. Vincent gave way; it was rather because the keen interest she had once taken in the working of the farm had been gradually lulled, even half forgotten in her great love for the man she had first

seen when middle-age had already overtaken her. There was another reason too, but it existed unknown to any one, even to herself. Mrs. Vincent had become less active in the last year or two, more silent and thoughtful. Her hair was greyer, the lines on her face were deeper, dull pains beset her sometimes, and a lethargy she could not conquer. She put it down, as those about her did, to the gathering years, and the hurrying of time; now and then it struck her that she 'wasn't over well, that some day she 'd see a doctor,' but she dismissed the idea with the conviction that it was nothing, only that she was growing old—the worst disease of all, she thought, since every hour of life was sweet that she spent in the home that was also Gerald Vincent's: it delighted her to think of it as his. Oddly enough, she, as well as Hannah, had been almost relieved when he went. It was the right thing for a man to go out and see the world, no women folk should tie him down for ever; she even felt a little unselfish pleasure in remembering that it was she who had first proposed it. While he was away she determined to rest well, and sleep away her tiredness, and all the uneasiness it brought, so that she might be strong to welcome him back. But after the excitement of getting him ready, and the passionate though undemonstrative farewell, a reaction came. She shut herself up in her room once or twice, so that her tears might not

be suspected; and when she had grown more accustomed to his absence sat brooding in the living-place or the porch, trying to imagine what he was doing and to picture his surroundings.

'I must be a fool to go on like this at my age,' she said to herself, 'I would't let the girls know for anything.'

For Margaret, her father's going brought all sorts of restrictions and limitations; but her mother was too much wrapped up in her own dreams to perceive it, or to draw closer to her than before, and so to make up for the loss of his companionship. Thus Hannah was free to show the dislike she had always felt, and to worry her with petty tyrannies.

'The best parlour will be used by any one who likes till he returns,' she promptly announced. 'It has been kept apart long enough, as if the whole of the house wasn't fit for those who own it to live in, unless it was sometimes by way of a treat.'

'It was kept apart because father wanted to read and write and be quiet,' Margaret answered.

'Well, there 's no one who need read and write now; you can do more useful things, and will be all the better for it; as for being quiet, there 's others that will want to be quiet sometimes, and it 'll do for them. Mr. Garratt is coming over to his dinner on Sundays, and we shall sit there in the afternoon—if we are not taking a walk.

Mother is always in the porch, and we don't want you hanging about us.'

'I am glad to get away,' Margaret said quickly.

'You do your best to keep his eyes fixed on you, anyway; but you needn't think you'll draw him to yourself; it isn't likely he'd mean anything by an unbeliever.'

'I don't want him,' Margaret cried, and fled up to the beech-wood that stood high behind the farm as though it were the landscape's crown. Here, in some inconsequent manner born of the instinct that only comes to a woman's heart, she waited for Tom Carringford, or for news of him. That happy morning in London had changed the whole current of her thoughts, had put something strange and sweet into her life that she did not attempt to define and hardly knew to be there. But she wanted to see him again—and she waited, dreaming as her mother did; yet differently. He would come, or he would write, and soon: she felt it and knew it. But the days went by, and the weeks, and the first month of her father's absence, and nothing happened. She was a little disappointed, yet thought herself unreasonable, for, of course, he was thinking of his under-secretaryship, building castles concerning his Parliamentary career—in Margaret's dreams he was certain to be Prime Minister some day—or going out with his friends; and she thought [illegible] Lakemans: he had no time to

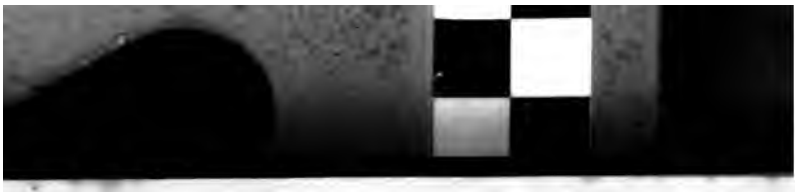
go to Hindhead, or to remember her father's invitation. And why should she expect him to write? He would come perhaps when Sir George Stringer was established at the house on the hill.

But neither of Sir George was there any sign. Every day, in the early morning or the twilight mostly, she hurried through the fields, towards the road on which the church and the garden entrance to his house faced each other on either side; but the gates were always closed, and a chain round them fastened by a padlock showed that as yet he was not expected. Then she came away slowly, and with dull disappointment in her heart, which Hannah's temper and tyranny emphasised. The foundations of life seemed to be giving way, she felt it as she passed the windows of the empty best parlour, or saw her mother, erect still, but older and graver, sitting in the porch. The happiness of home, the dear home of all her life, had waned lately.

'Are you well, mother?' she asked uneasily. 'Sometimes I think you are suffering.' This was five weeks after Mr. Vincent had started.

'It's nothing,' Mrs. Vincent answered. 'I'm getting on in years, Margey, at fifty-six aches and pains have a right to take some hold on one, I shall be better when your father returns; perhaps I did a little too much before he went.'

'Yes, you did, darling,' Margaret answered,



kissing the hands—large capable hands, that not even the rough farm work had ever made coarse.

'There'll be a good many months to rest in before he comes,' Mrs. Vincent went on, 'perhaps it's as well that he's away for a bit.'

'But, mother dear, you used to be so active only a little while ago.'

'You see, Hannah's older, and likes doing things herself,' Mrs. Vincent answered, 'and that's as well too, it gives me time to think over all the years back. I was never able to do it before, the days have always been too full. You mustn't trouble about me, dear; when people are getting on they like being quiet.' It was evident that her mother wanted to be let alone, and Margaret respected her wish though it made her own life more difficult.

And then there was Mr. Garratt, brisk and vulgar, with the veneer of shoddy education over him, and the alertness of intelligence that is bent on 'getting on' and making the most of chances. His coming and going would have been of little consequence to Margaret if he had left her alone. But this was precisely what he did not do. She spoke to him as little as possible, and showed unconsciously that she thought him a rather inferior person; but he faced everything, and was a difficult young man to abash.

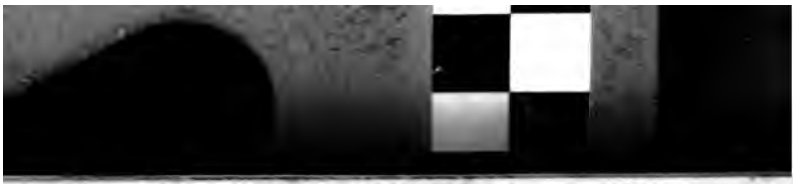
Moreover Mr. Garratt had lately been going through an acute phase of his own, for possibilities

had suggested themselves that puzzled and distracted him. He had seized a chance to improve his business by establishing a branch at Guildford, where he proposed to live during the summer months, leaving the Petersfield branch, more or less, to take care of itself. Land had gone up in Surrey, there was a good deal of buying and selling to be done among the people who were anxious to build the red-brick houses at which Sir George Stringer had scoffed, and it occurred to Mr. Garratt that the fashion might be used to his profit. Besides, he was tired of Petersfield, Guildford was nearer town, 'a better class of people go there,' he said, with the knowingness that grated on Margaret. It had lately become a rule that he appeared on Sunday morning and went to church with Mrs. Vincent and Hannah, walking back with them to the mid-day meal, which never varied—cold beef and baked plum pudding in the winter, cold lamb and fruit tart in the summer, always eaten in silence, as if the Sabbath were a time of penance—and after it he was expected to submit, as he knew quite well, to a *tête-à-tête* in the best parlour. But while he was getting his house and office ready at Guildford he often found it possible to take the afternoon train to Haslemere, and at Haslemere he hired a little dog-cart with a fat grey pony, and drove himself over to Chidhurst, where he stayed to tea, driving himself back again in the early summer twilight. It was

concerning the line he should take on these afternoons, that were somehow easier than the Sunday visits, that he was exercised in his mind. He had first considered Hannah from a matrimonial point of view on the advice of his mother, who had been assured by old Mrs. James Barton, of Petersfield, that she would ultimately possess Woodside Farm. It had seemed to Mr. Garratt that, by the time he was prepared to retire, the farm would be an excellent retreat for his old age, and meanwhile Hannah would make him a careful wife. But he was a far-seeing young man, who had a way of considering things in all their bearings, hence he had purposely held aloof for a long time for the simple reason that there was no occasion to hurry. He knew what Hannah was like, and had come to the conclusion that on the whole she would do. But she did not inspire him to any display of sentiment, and there was no reason why he should waste his time with her when he felt that he could be employed quite as agreeably and perhaps more profitably at home. It was simply to make sure that things were going on satisfactorily that he went at last to Woodside Farm, and not from any particular desire to see her.

Then to his surprise Margaret had appeared. She took his breath away, and being a young man of intelligence he saw at once that she and her father were altogether of a different class from that to which he was accustomed. He

wondered how she came to be there, how her father came to be there, and what had induced him to marry Mrs. Vincent and settle down at the farm. 'There must be a screw loose, somewhere,' he thought; but what would a dozen screws matter to him if only—for it promptly occurred to him—he could marry Margaret? The thought intoxicated him; she was young and beautiful, she made the blood dance through his veins as it had not done since he was two-and-twenty, when he had fallen in love with the daughter of a dentist who had thrown him over for the purser of an Atlantic-going steamer; and that young lady had not been a patch on this one. With a wife like Margaret, he told himself, there was no knowing what might be done, to what heights he might rise in these democratic days. He looked at Hannah's face, it was faded and somewhat weather-beaten, there were lines of temper on it—they would be deeper by and by; the hard grey-blue of her eyes chilled him, her tightly-pulled back hair repelled him, her manner suggested that time would make her shrewish. Life with her would mean a clean, well-ordered home of a sort; but hardly a gay and pleasant dovecot. Luckily he had not in any way committed himself, he had merely been extremely polite and friendly, and entered upon that stage which in the class just below the one he considered to be his own, was known as 'walking-out,' a



sort of prelude to getting engaged. But he had not said a single word of love; he had looked at her, it is true, but a cat may look at a king. The worst of it was that he could never manage to make any impression upon Margaret; at best she was only civil to him; she spoke as little as possible, and generally vanished soon after his arrival; there were times when he felt her manner to be a little contemptuous, still he determined not to bind himself in another direction till he made sure that she was impossible. He looked in the glass and came to the conclusion that he was by no means bad-looking; the curl of his hair and the fairness of his moustache he considered to be strong points to the good in his appearance.

'She is a little young,' he said to himself, 'and doesn't know what 's what yet. A girl isn't up to much till she is two-and-twenty. She 's had time then to look round at home, and to see that there mayn't always be room for her in it. Moreover, she knows then when a fellow is worth having, and doesn't give herself so many airs as she does at first. I wonder if my dress is quite up to the mark? She has a quick eye, I twigged that directly, and she 's been to London, and they always think they know a good deal after that.' He considered this point very carefully, with the result that the next time he went to Haslemere he wore drab spats over his by no means ill-made

shoes; a white handkerchief, fine, and slightly scented with White Rose, showed itself from his breast pocket, and in his hand he carried a crop, for he had determined that instead of driving he would ride to the farm. It would look more spirited, he thought, to trot beside the moor, past the church, along the road and down the green lane, arriving with a clatter at the porch, than to appear in even the neatest of traps. There was a decent mare to be hired at 'The Brown Bear' at Haslemere. He wrote to the landlord, and felt quite elated at an imaginary picture of himself and the effect it would have on Margaret.

CHAPTER XII

MR. VINCENT had arranged that while he was away his two hundred a-year should be paid to Margaret; the five hundred pounds legacy, of which he had spoken, would, he knew, be more than sufficient for his travelling needs. The payment of the little income to Margaret had been Mrs. Vincent's suggestion.

'You see I shall not want it,' she said, 'and it will be better for her to have it. Then if anything happens while you are gone it will be there, and if not she 'll save it, and when you come back we 'll do something with it.' Margaret was only told of this after her father's departure.

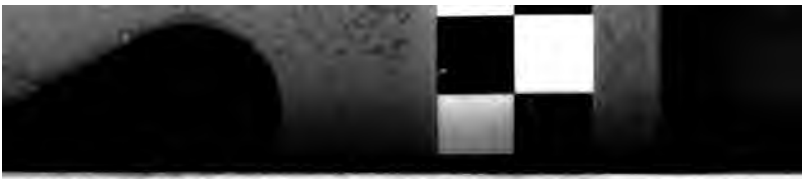
'You 'll feel quite rich,' her mother said.

'Why, yes,' Margaret answered, and in truth it seemed like a fortune laid at her feet. 'You and I might go a-travelling, mother darling.'

Mrs. Vincent looked up slowly. 'I 'm better at home; travelling is not good for old people.' But while she spoke, an absent look came into her eyes and for a moment she thought that it would be a strange thing to go to places that her husband had known all his life, but that she had never seen.

Only for a moment, then she shook her head: she had lived on the farm all the years that she remembered, and had no wish to see beyond it.

But Margaret had not made her remark seriously. It never occurred to her that her mother would ever go far from the farm: it was her own heart that stirred, for the restlessness of youth was in it. It seemed to her sometimes as if messages stole over the Surrey hills from the city beyond them. She wondered what it would feel like to go to London again—and alone; to be among the people there, to see the streets and hear the rumble of the traffic; to live, as Miss Hunstan did, in white and blue rooms in a quaint old street with a grey-haired woman to wait on her, and, above all, to do something outside in the open. She had come to see that there was a high road through the world along which people worked their way. She had been thinking of it a great deal lately. Moreover, the fascination of the theatre had laid hold of her. She had often wondered about it even when she was a little girl, for a knowledge of Shakespeare had been part of her education in the best parlour; but instinctively she had avoided speaking of it in the living-place, for once Hannah had said that the theatre was an abomination and hateful to the Lord; and the words had stayed by Margaret. She thought of them in secret and wondered why the Lord hated it, and how Hannah knew that He



did, and, above all, what was done in it. Sometimes she used to lie awake and try to imagine; but the remembrance of Hannah's voice made the imaginings half a nightmare, as of something uncanny. One day, almost afraid of her own daring, she asked her father about it, and with his calm voice and obvious knowledge he had swept away the grotesque fancies and strange cobwebs. Thus the first sense of Hannah's narrowness had dawned upon her. Then the reading days came, and with them a dreamy knowledge of great tragedies and comedies that gathered round humanity. To go to one of the places where these were represented became a secret longing of her heart: she little thought that when her father took her to London it was partly that he might gratify it. Mr. Vincent, though he had no intention of being secretive, seldom expressed his thoughts till it seemed desirable: like his wife he felt that there was too much talking in the world, and silence he regarded as one of the great luxuries held out to human nature.

The play had duly exercised its power over Margaret, but for this she had been prepared; it was the fascination of the players that took her by surprise. At first they seemed to her unsophisticated eyes to be a race apart, with an endowment from the past and a strange insight into the heart of the world. Gradually the glamour paled a

little, as she realised that once they had been just ordinary folk living everyday lives, and that they might even now be seen passing each other in the crowded streets of London. But she realised, too, and it opened an endless vista of possibilities, that for all things there was a beginning and an end: the actress who played Constance in *King John*, though her tones had seemed to come from a heart that had only to feel keenly to produce them, had once made a beginning. What a wonderful thing it must be to make anything, to begin anything, that was counted in the world! If only she had been older, or had talked it over with her father, or if some strange and hard necessity were to overtake her and drive her onwards, she felt as if hidden capacities might develop themselves and strength come to her. It was a foolish dream, but perhaps it was a refuge from Hannah, and a retreat to which she could hurry at will; it was even better than books. After all, it was only the things that people had heard and seen and thought that were gathered up and put into books; if she went out into the world she might get them at first-hand for herself. 'I want to know things,' she had said to her father that morning in London; 'I want to know things, and to do them,' she cried to herself, one afternoon in the woods, and amid the stillness of the coming summer at Chidhurst. Since her father went away, she had drawn very

close to Nature beneath the great elms of her cathedral, and the mysteries and immensities about her seemed to whisper secrets concerning the world that she longed to understand.

But nearly six weeks had passed, and except for the coming and going of Mr. Garratt, life had virtually stood still at Woodside Farm. 'If only Sir George Stringer would arrive,' she said to herself that day, 'I should feel as if it were the beginning of a new chapter.' She had not ventured to look at the house on the hill for the last day or two, but she would go now, she thought —something told her there would be news. 'I will go this very minute,' she cried, 'and then if there is no sign I will wait a whole week.'

She went quickly towards it through a copse and growth of underwood, over a ditch into the fields, across the fields and out by the church to the road. She saw in a moment that the gates of the house were open, and her heart bounded. He was coming, perhaps he had come already, and she would hear something about Tom Carringford. She went a few steps up the drive, between the larches and the fir-trees with the little monthly rose bushes in front, and wondered if she dared go up to the house and ask for him—her father's old friend would hardly take it amiss? Then she met the handy man who looked after the garden. Sir George had come the night before, he told her, come for a week, but he was

out, drove away in a fly to see some of the country round about, most likely.

But Margaret was satisfied, and went out of the gate with a smile on her lips—to find herself face to face with Mr. Garratt on his steed. He was ambling past cautiously, not in the least expecting to see her, but the moment he did he pulled himself up and tried to look smart and unconcerned. She laughed and nodded to him because she was so happy, and because it amused her to see Hannah's sweetheart riding by supremely satisfied with himself, and his spats, his crop and his bowler hat. He tugged at his moustache the moment he saw Margaret, and lifted his hat with a little flourish.

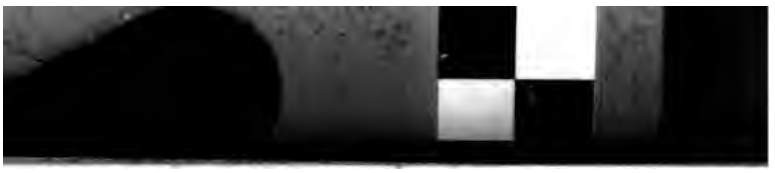
'Why, Mr. Garratt,' she said, 'I didn't know you.'

He was delighted at her manner—'a little less stuck-up than usual' he told himself—and took it as a tribute to his improved appearance He held his reins tightly and swayed about a little in his saddle as if his steed were restive.

'Riding is rather more lively, Miss Vincent, than tooling along in a trap; of course, if there 's some one beside you it 's different.' He tried to put significance into his tone.

'You should get Hannah to meet you at the station in the brown cart and drive you back,' she said wickedly.

'I 'm not sure whether it would be an enjoy-



ment or not, Miss Vincent.' She passed him while he spoke, and stood by the gate that opened into the field.

'You might try it,' she suggested, as she undid the latch. 'We shall meet presently,' she said with a little nod of dismissal; 'I'm going this way.'

In a moment he had dismounted and stood by her side. 'I can lead the mare across the grass and have the pleasure of escorting you at the same time,' he said quickly. They stood looking at each other for a moment, and the intolerance she always felt for him came back.

'I'm not sure that I'm going home yet,' she said, 'or that I'm going back this way after all.'

'Any way will do for me, I'm not in a hurry. We might have a little talk about London, and the theatres,' he added, with a sudden inspiration. 'Miss Barton is rather strict, you know.'

'Hannah was brought up to think the theatre a wicked place, so she is quite right not to go to one, and to disapprove of people who do. My father didn't think it wrong——'

'Neither do I, Miss Vincent.' They were walking across the field by this time, he leading the mare, and she taking the narrow footpath; 'in fact, though I wouldn't like to tell Miss Barton so, I am very fond of it. Why, when I was up for a few days a month ago I went four times.' He looked at her knowingly as if to

establish a confidence. 'I went to see *The Lovers' Lesson*—a lovely piece, Miss Vincent; it made one feel,' Mr. Garratt lowered his voice, 'what real love was. Oh, I say, there 's a stile to this next field, I had forgotten that. I shall have to take the mare over.' He put his foot into the stirrup, vaulted into the saddle, and went over with the air of a huntsman taking a five-barred gate; then dismounted and waited for Margaret. 'Allow me to give you a hand,' he said, and squeezed her fingers as she stepped down.

'Please don't,' she said haughtily.

'I 'd do it again,' he said, 'to see the colour come like that; you don't know what you make one feel like.'

'I don't wish to know. Be good enough to remember that you come to see Hannah.'

'But it isn't Hannah I want to come and see.'

She turned upon him quickly. 'It is only Hannah who wishes to see you, understand that.'

'Oh, I say, what a spitfire! Look here, Miss Vincent, don't be angry. You and I ought to be friends, you know; and I don't mean any harm.'

'After all, he is only vulgar,' Margaret thought. 'Of course you don't mean any harm—' she said, not very graciously.

He felt that it would be a good move to get back to neutral subjects.

'Do you know the gent who has taken the

house by the church?' he asked. 'You seemed to be taking an interest in him.'

'He is a friend of my father's,' she condescended to inform him.

'He must be a swell—he's a "Sir," anyhow. You know, I've got an idea that you and your father are swells too. Why you and Miss Barton are as different as chalk from cheese—there isn't any looking at her when you are there.'

Margaret walked on without a word, but he followed her meekly: it was all the same to Mr. Garratt.

'You're a downright beauty, that's what I think. I say! There's Hannah standing by the porch looking out,' for by this time they were within half a field and the length of the garden from the house. 'She will be wild when she sees me walking with you, you know. Now then,' he added, touching his own shoulder with the crop in his hand, as she made a sign of impatience; 'don't be disagreeable again, there's a dear girl. Let's talk about the theatre; you like that, you know, and we've only got five minutes left. I'll tell you what you ought to have seen—*The School for Scandal*, and Miss Hunstan in it.'

'Oh, did you see her!' Margaret exclaimed, and took a step nearer to him.

Hannah watching from the porch saw it. A deep pink came to her cheeks and to the tip of her nose. Some one in the best parlour, looking

through the little lattice window, saw it too, and drew conclusions.

'Oh, you want to know about her, do you?' Mr. Garratt said triumphantly. 'Now, why is that?'

'I met her at a friend's house when I was in London with father.'

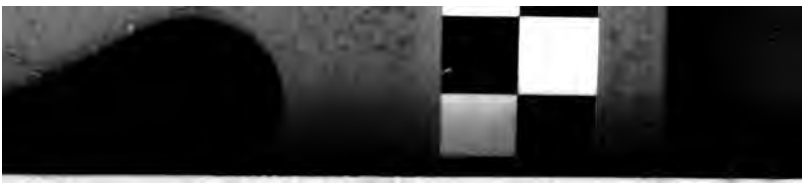
'Did you! Well, I wouldn't tell Hannah so, if I were you; she'd ask them to put up a prayer in chapel for you.'

'Tell me about Miss Hunstan—she played Lady Teazle——'

'Oh, you've heard about Lady Teazle, have you? Well, she was just splendid. You should have seen her chaff that old husband of hers and the way she held her head when the screen fell. A friend of mine was over in New York when she first came out—fifteen years ago now—getting on, isn't it?'

'What did she do first?'

'She walked on holding up the train of a princess, but she did it with such an air the young fellows used to go in just to look at her. Then Dawson Farley went over there with an English company and spotted her, I suppose, and gave her a small part to play. She was just about your age,' Mr. Garratt added significantly. 'People said they were going to be married, and there was a lot of talk about it, but it didn't come off, and she went about the States acting, and became a



swell, and he became a swell over here. Now she 's over here too, starring as Lady Teazle. I wonder if she ever sees Dawson Farley.'

'Oh, yes. I met them both when I was in London; he said they were old friends.'

'You seem to have done a great deal on that visit of yours, and it only lasted a sandwiched night, did it?' he said, hurrying after her, but handicapped by having to lead his horse.

'Did you see Miss Hunstan in anything else?' Margaret asked, taking no notice of his remark.

'I saw her once in a mixture performance, got up for a charity—actors and actresses showing off in little bits, you know.'

'What did she do?'

'She recited a poem by an American chap called Field. I daresay you know all about him, being fond of poetry?'

'No, I never heard of him.'

Mr. Garratt was triumphant. 'Really! I bought his poems and recited one of them myself at an entertainment we got up for the new chapel at Midhurst——'

'Oh.'

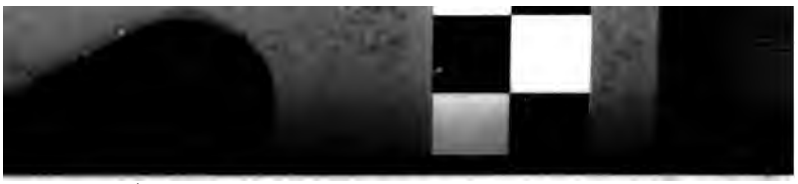
'I might lend you the book?' but she made no answer. 'I take a lively interest in most things,' he went on quickly, for he saw that their talk must necessarily come to an end in a moment, 'and I should very much enjoy getting a little more conversation with you than I do at present.

I think we take a similar view of a good many things. Now, Miss Barton and I take a different one. To tell the truth, I 'm not over fond of chapel going and psalm singing. I believe in seeing a bit of life, and London 's the place to see it in. I say '—he went up nearer to her—' I wish we were there together, don't you, eh ?' and he gave her a little nudge.

She stopped and flushed with rage. 'No, I do not,' she answered, 'and you will not touch me again, Mr. Garratt ; I dislike people who are too familiar.' She rubbed her elbow as if it had been stung, and strode on.

'Well, you 've got a plainer way of speaking than any other young lady I 've ever met in my life,' he said, catching her up, 'but I 'll tell you something before we part—there isn't anything in the world I wouldn't do for you. Perhaps you think I 'm a little free in my manner, but we can't all be as high and mighty as you are—we 're not made that way, you know——'

She went through the garden gate without a word, while Mr. Garratt had to stand still and hold his horse. 'Hannah!' she called. He looked a little bit startled, as if he thought she might be going to tell tales. 'You had better come—Mr. Garratt is here.'



CHAPTER XIII

HANNAH came quickly along the garden, her face very red, and its expression by no means a pleasant one.

'How do you do, Miss Barton?' Mr. Garratt shouted pleasantly, determined anyway to put a good face on the situation. 'I met Miss Vincent on the hill, and led the mare across the fields for the pleasure of her company.'

'Was it an appointment?' she asked sharply.

'Not on her side,' he said by way of a little joke, 'and not on mine,' he added quickly—for Margaret had stopped, and there seemed to be an explanation on her lips—'only an unexpected pleasure. Shall I take the mare round to the stable, Miss Barton?'

'Jim,' Hannah called at the top of her voice, and a boy appeared from one of the side buildings. 'Come and take Mr. Garratt's horse—and give it a feed of corn,' she added, for it suddenly occurred to her that she was not making a very amiable appearance before her supposed suitor. 'Margaret, you had better go into the

house; there is some one with mother, and she wants you.'

Margaret was halfway down a side path on the left, but she turned in an instant, went quickly up the garden, and vanished through the porch.

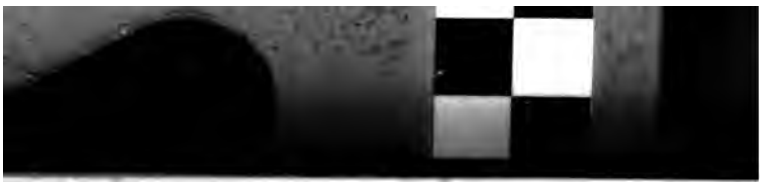
'What was she up to?' Mr. Garratt asked Hannah as they walked on beside the yew hedge, reluctantly on his part, but she was a dominant person, and not easy to thwart. 'Going to meet any one?'

'Oh, she was only taking herself off to that wood up there—that's what she does on Sunday mornings instead of going to church like a Christian and walking home with mother,' Hannah answered resentfully, for if Margaret had attended to her religious duties properly, she reflected, it would not have been necessary for Mr. Garratt to walk back beside Mrs. Vincent. 'In these days, Mr. Garratt, people don't seem to be taken with the thought of going to Heaven as they used, and they are not afraid of eternal punishment as they should be.'

'Well, you see, Miss Barton, according to them there is nothing to be gained by dying, and the only thing to do is to make the best of what they've got.'

'Mr. Garratt, I don't like the way you're talking; it's not a reverent spirit.'

'It's not meant to be anything else, I assure you, Miss Barton,' he answered in an apologetic



tone, tapping his right leg with the crop which he still held in his hand. She raised her eyes and saw his new bowler hat, and the white handkerchief in his breast-pocket, and her manner softened.

'When do you think of settling in Guildford?' she asked.

'I shall be over there in another six weeks,' he answered; 'they're painting the window frames now. I hope you and Mrs. Vincent will come over some day,' he added after a pause. 'I should like to have your opinion of the place.'

'I shall be willing to give it to you,' she said demurely, and waited expectantly, but he said nothing more. He was thinking of Margaret again.

'Do you know anything of Vincent's people? has he got any besides this brother out in Australia?' he asked.

'He's never spoken of them—not even of the brother till last year. I must tell you frankly, Mr. Garratt, that I never liked him. He is a man who has rejected religion, and brought up his child to do the same.'

'You know, it strikes me somehow that they are swells,' Mr. Garratt said confidentially, 'who have done something shady, or else he did something shady himself, there's never any telling. If that's it he may have been suddenly afraid of being found out, and taken himself off

altogether. You 've only his word for it that he 's got a brother, I suppose ?'

Hannah looked at him dismayed. This idea would cover many odd feelings and instincts that she had encouraged in regard to Mr. Vincent. That he should be some sort of criminal in disguise seemed feasible enough when she remembered his opinions, and that he should desert his wife and daughter would be a natural outcome of them.

'He had letters with the Australian postmark,' she said, remembering this proof of her stepfather's veracity.

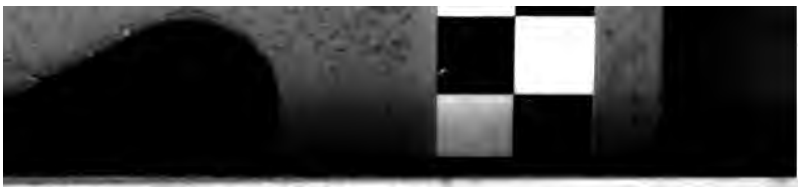
'They might be managed,' Mr. Garratt answered in a knowing manner that added to Hannah's consternation.

'There 's some one that knows him come to see mother now. I was looking for Margaret, and didn't stay to hear his name.'

'It 's probably the gent who 's taken the house on the hill ; we might go and see what he 's like,' Mr. Garratt said quickly, and hurried her towards the house elated at the thought of meeting on terms of more or less equality some one whom in the ordinary course he would have had to treat with the respect due to a superior.

But Sir George Stringer had been and gone. He was just going when Margaret returned.

'I drove over for the pleasure of calling on your



mother and of seeing you again,' he had said. 'You were evidently having a most interesting conversation as you came across the field—I hope it has not been interrupted on my account.' He looked at her curiously and saw the colour rush to her face.

'It 's only Mr. Garratt,' Mrs. Vincent explained; 'he often comes over from Guildford to see us.'

'Of course he does. I don't blame him,' Sir George answered. Margaret had no courage to contradict the mistake, and Mrs. Vincent did not see it. 'You would have seen me before,' he went on, 'but I have had a sister ill at Folkestone. I fear I can't stay any longer now, but I shall come again in a day or two.'

Margaret walked to the gate with him, confused and mortified, but she made an effort to set matters right.

'I didn't know you were here——'

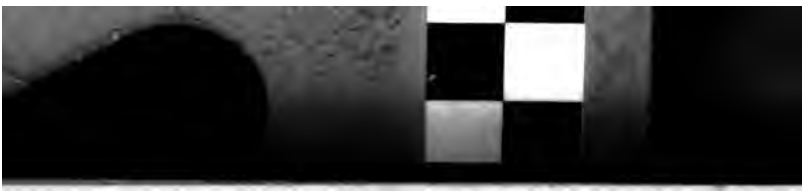
'Never mind,' he said good-naturedly. 'I 'm going to stay a fortnight at least, and you 'll see me very often. Are you and your mother here alone?'

'There is Hannah——'

'Oh, yes, the sharp-faced woman who let me in, I suppose? She evidently keeps an eye upon you. I saw her in the garden watching your approach with a great deal of anxiety and perhaps not much approval,' he added significantly. The fly had been waiting in the lane instead of by the porch. He got in before he held out his hand.

'Sir George, I want to tell you——' she began, and stopped, for it was so difficult. Mr. Garratt was not Hannah's accepted lover, he had said nothing as yet to put him in the position of one; and it suddenly occurred to Margaret that she had after all nothing to explain. 'Mr. Garratt knows mother's relations at Petersfield—Hannah's grandmother, you know,' she went on tamely, 'and he asked if he might come and see her and——'

'I quite understand,' Sir George interrupted, anxious to prevent any confidences. 'By the way, I dare say you will have Carringford over next week; he is going to Hindhead and said he should come and see you, and look me up on the way. Good-bye,' and in a moment he had started. She stood watching him almost in despair. Suppose he told Tom Carringford about Mr. Garratt? Oh, but when he came again—he said just now that he should come often—she would explain it all very clearly. Only it was a difficult thing to do, and why should it matter to Mr. Carringford? Perhaps it would be better to leave it alone, then Sir George might forget about Mr. Garratt; besides, Mr. Walford, the clergyman, would be sure to call at the house on the hill, and if by any chance Woodside Farm were mentioned, he would probably say that Mr. Garratt was walking out with Hannah—he was always at church with her on Sunday mornings. She remembered



joyfully that Sir George would see them there together, and in a little place like Chidhurst everything was talked about.

'Good Heavens, how lovely she is,' Sir George thought as he drove away, 'and what a pity that she should be left to those two women.' For he and Mrs. Vincent had spent an awkward ten minutes, not knowing in the least what to say to each other, and he had naturally come to the conclusion that she was a handsome but quite ordinary woman of her class. 'And that young tradesman with the crisp curling hair showing under the brim of his bowler hat, and the look of a bounder—Vincent ought to be shot for leaving her to him.' It was no business of his, of course, but it vexed him so much that he felt he could not bring himself to pay another visit to the farm.

CHAPTER XIV

Mr. Garratt hired the mare on which he had made so successful an appearance, by the month, and determined to enjoy his long rides across the beautiful Surrey country. He thought matters well over, and came to the conclusion that it would be as well to keep up an appearance of paying attention to Hannah lest he should lose the bird in the hand before he had made sure of catching the one in the bush. But he found it difficult, for her voice set his teeth on edge, and her conversation, which was always harking round to evangelical subjects, with hits at her step-father and Margaret, irritated him till there were times when he could have shaken her. He was fully alive to the charms of the property that would one day be hers, and he saw her thrifty qualities clearly enough; but this was not all a man wanted, he told himself. He wanted besides a woman he could love and look at, and be proud of, and whose possession other men would envy him.

'If Margaret only showed a little common-sense,' he thought, 'she might be riding beside

me two or three times a week. She would look stunning in a habit, and I wouldn't mind standing it, and the nag too. People would sit up a bit if one day they saw us trotting through Guildford together. As for Hannah, she isn't fit to lick her boots.' Even in a worldly sense he had come to the conclusion that Margaret would suit him better. 'She'd pull one up,' he thought, 'for I'm certain she's a swell, though she mayn't know it herself, while t'other would keep one where one is for the rest of one's days.' He touched up the mare in his excitement, and went by the church and towards the green lane in a canter.

Sir George Stringer, hidden behind the greenery of his garden, saw him pass. 'That young bounder is going after Vincent's girl again,' he said to himself. 'I'd rather marry her myself than let him have her, not that she'd look at a grizzly old buffer five years her father's senior. I'll tell Hilda Lakeman about it; perhaps she will ask the girl there and get the nonsense out of her.' He went up to town the next day, and made a point of lunching at the Embankment, and of sitting an hour in the flower-scented room afterwards; but Mrs. Lakeman was not as ready to help in the matter as he had imagined she would be.

'Gerald's family has come to a pretty pass,' she said with contemptuous amusement. 'I'd do anything for him, dear old boy; but if his girl

is in love with this young man, what would be the good of bringing her to town? I couldn't undertake the responsibility of it, I couldn't indeed, old friend.'

'Did little Margaret seem fond of her tradesman?' Lena asked, sitting down on a low stool near her mother and looking up at Sir George.

'Well, I saw them get closer together as they crossed the field, and loiter out of sight behind the hedge before they came into the garden, and she blushed when she spoke of him.'

'Dear little Margaret,' purred Lena, 'why shouldn't she marry him and be happy? It would be far better than interfering. I must tell Tom about it, he'll be so amused.'

'I wish Tom would marry her,' Sir George said fervently.

'He's coming to-day. I'll tell him what you say.'

'Then you'll mull it. I shall have to invite him to Chidhurst, I think.'

'I think you had better invite us,' said Mrs. Lakeman. 'I should like to see Mrs. Gerald.'

'Of course I will, you must come for a week-end. When shall it be?'

'Later, before we go to Scotland in August,' Mrs. Lakeman answered. 'Tom is going with us,' she added, and looked at Lena out of the tail of her eye.

Lena rose and sauntered towards the curtains.

'He is coming at four,' she said in a low tone, 'I am going to watch for him.'

Then Mrs. Lakeman put on her most dramatic manner, restrained, but full of feeling. 'George Stringer,' she said in a thick harsh voice, 'I loved Gerald Vincent once, and would do anything in the world for him, but I can't give away—even to his girl—my own child's happiness. You won't interfere, will you, old friend? You won't throw Margaret Vincent in his way?'

'I don't understand,' he said slowly; 'what do you mean?'

She held out her hands to him. 'May God forgive me for betraying my child's secret!'—she managed to put a heartfelt tone into her words, and was quite pleased with it—'but I think—for I can't give her away more explicitly than that—I think she loves Tom.'

'He hasn't proposed?'

'No, but he's devoted to her. He sees her every day of his life, does everything we do, goes everywhere we go: he can't live without her.' It hasn't yet occurred to him that the end must be the only one possible for two children who love each other—but it will.'

Sir George looked at her and hesitated. 'Humph! He's very well off——'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Fairly well off, but not rich.'

'And a nice boy,' Sir George went on. 'The

sort of boy for whom places are made, and things done——'

'That doesn't matter;' but in spite of her off-hand manner, there was satisfaction in her voice. 'I am thinking of my child's happiness, George. Besides, I love the boy, and want him for my own!'

'All right, my dear, all right,' he said, and, seeing it was expected of him, he took both her hands in his. 'It's always better not to interfere with young people.'

'It's always better,' she answered fervently.

'And I hope it will turn out as you wish,' he gave her hands a little grip and dropped them. 'I must go,' he added quickly, an insane desire to get away laying hold of him.

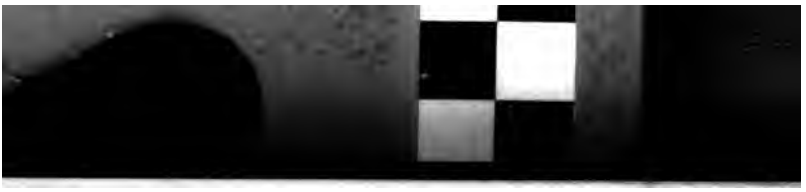
'Good-bye, old friend,' she said, looking him recklessly in the eyes.

'Good-bye,' he answered, and almost hurried to the door.

'You old idiot,' she thought, as she heard it close on him, 'I hope you are satisfied.'

Sir George walked away with an uneasy feeling at the back of his head. 'I wonder if Hilda Lakeman was lying,' he said to himself. 'I never understand her, and for the life of me I can never quite believe in her. She is tricky—tricky.'

He saw Mr. Garratt at Haslemere station waiting for the Guildford train. 'I should like to



punch his head,' he thought, but this desire, of course, made no difference in any way.

Meanwhile matters had not improved at Woodside Farm. A fierce jealousy was raging in Hannah's virgin heart; she found it difficult even to keep her hands off Margaret. 'I should like to box your ears and lock you up in your room,' she said spitefully one day, when she could no longer control herself.

'Hannah, for shame!' Mrs. Vincent said, but even her efforts to keep the peace seemed somewhat futile.

'It's a pity you didn't go to Australia with your father,' Hannah went on: 'you are only in the way here.'

'Oh, if he had but taken me!' Margaret answered fervently.

'Perhaps he didn't want you. We've only his word for it there is this brother in Australia—and what is that worth, I should like to know?'

Mrs. Vincent looked up quickly from her seat in the porch. 'I'll have you speak with respect of the man who is my husband,' she said gently.

'And shame to you, mother, that he is. He has undermined your faith, and made you forget your first husband's child.'

'Hannah, you will be silent,' Mrs. Vincent answered with some of her old dignity. 'We have each kept to our own way of thinking, and neither has meddled with the other. I have

never forgotten your father, nor what was due to him ; but one has to make the best of life, and I was a young woman when he died.'

Something in her voice touched Hannah. 'I know that, mother,' she said, 'and I've tried to be a good daughter to you, and if sometimes I've thought I didn't get my share of what you felt, why it's only natural that I should complain. What's come between us and is trying to come between me and what is due to me, is the artfulness that has got no principle to build upon.'

'If I could but get away! If Mrs. Lakeman would ask me to stay with her, or if I were like Miss Hunstan, and could act and live by myself till father came back,' Margaret said to herself so often that the idea took deeper and deeper hold upon her.

Why shouldn't she? All things have a beginning, she thought again, all journeys a starting-point. Mr. Garratt had told her how Miss Hunstan had begun by holding up the train of a princess, and how step by step she had reached her present position. She wished she could see Miss Hunstan. They had only met once, and for a few minutes, but she had sent Margaret a little note to the Langham that day when she returned and found her room decked with flowers, and heard of Margaret's visit with Tom. The note had arrived too late, but it had been forwarded to Chidhurst. In it she had repeated

what she had said at the Lakemans', that she hoped they would meet again; and, as Tom had said, some people were never strangers. Margaret longed to go to London and ask Miss Hunstan's advice, and she didn't think her father would be angry or object if he knew all that was going on at Woodside Farm. He saw no harm in theatres, and she was not sophisticated enough to understand the difficulties in the way of a girl who was not yet twenty going to London, with a vague idea that she could 'walk on.' But for the unfortunate meeting with Mr. Garratt she might have consulted Sir George Stringer. She had hoped that he would come again, but day after day went by without a sign of him. Half-a-dozen times she went towards his house, wondering if she dared go up to the door and boldly ask for him, and half-a-dozen times her courage had failed her.

'If he doesn't come to-morrow, I will make myself go,' she said at last, when nearly a fortnight had gone and he had not appeared; but on the morrow again she hesitated. Tom Carringford might be there, and she was afraid to meet him, lest he should have heard of Mr. Garratt and be different. At last a note arrived from Sir George. He was going back to town, was starting when he wrote, and regretted that he had not been able to get to the farm again; he hoped to do so later. And so all hope in that direction vanished. She

talked to her mother one day, but nothing was gained by it.

'You couldn't go to London by yourself, Margey,' Mrs. Vincent said. 'I was never strict in my heart as James Barton was, or as Hannah is, but I shouldn't like you to take a step of that sort, out into the world, without your father's approval.'

'But, mother dear, every one has a life to live, and what is the use of me here? Hannah does all the farm business, and there's nothing that you want me to do. I just read and think and wait, and I don't know for what, unless it's for father's return.'

'It's a feeling that comes to us all,' Mrs. Vincent answered. 'It's the fluttering of the bird trying to leave its nest. Better wait till your father comes and sets you on your way.' Then Mrs. Vincent shut her lips and said no more. All her thoughts were with the man in Australia, the man younger than herself, at whom her heart clutched; all her hours were passed in a dream beside him till she had no energy left for the actual life about her, but let it slip by unheeded.

CHAPTER XV

At last on the afternoon of a day when Hannah was more than usually unbearable, Margaret determined to write to Miss Hunstan, asking if she might really go and see her if she went to London. This was in her own room over the porch—a little room with a latticed window and a seat to it, and an old-fashioned cupboard let into the wall.

'I will do it at once,' she cried; 'this very minute.' It gave her some comfort even to see the address on the envelope. She wrote it first, and when the letter was written too, she felt as if she had taken a step towards freedom. She put her elbows on the table, and resting her face on her hands, tried to imagine what freedom would be like, and all that might come of it. And while she did this, faint in the distance, as in a dream, she heard the sound of a horse's hoofs. They were coming nearer and nearer along the lane. She rose and looked out, but it was not possible to see the rider, for in the summer-time the hedges were thick and green. It was June now, and the honeysuckle and traveller's-joy grew high.

'Mr. Garratt again, I suppose,' she said to herself in despair.

The sound of the hoofs came nearer, they had come in at the gate, past the duck-pond, and the outbuildings and the hayricks, and round the corner of the garden. They stopped at the porch, and Margaret heard the boy call out—'I'm coming, sir,' and run to take the horse.

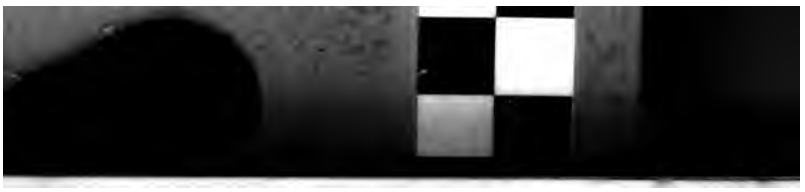
'He generally rides round to the stable himself,' she thought; but she had made up her mind that it was Mr. Garratt; and determined to keep her room all the afternoon. There was a knock at the front door, though it was standing wide open, and at that she started, for Mr. Garratt never knocked; he just walked in as if he felt that one day he would be the master. Towsey came out of the kitchen and shuffled through the living-place to the porch.

'Is Mrs. Vincent at home?' Then there was no doubt at all.

'It is Mr. Carringford,' Margaret said to herself, and her heart bounded with happiness.

'And is Miss Vincent at home?' she heard him further ask as Towsey showed him into the best parlour.

'And is Miss Vincent at home?' she echoed to herself, just for sheer joy. 'Yes, she is—she is!' and danced a fan-fan round her room. But she stopped suddenly—suppose he had heard about Mr. Garratt? Perhaps he hadn't, though.



Sir George had gone—oh, what a good thing that was. And since he had not come again, he might have forgotten about Mr. Garratt and every one else at the farm. She stopped before her glass, gave a quick look at herself, and in a moment had taken down her hair. She smiled as she saw the glint of gold in it, and twisted it up into quite a neat knot. 'Now, my lace collar;' she pinned it round her throat and fastened it with a little heart brooch that her mother had given her on her birthday; 'and my best shoes, for these are shabby at the toes.' Then she was ready.

She stopped for a moment at the head of the stairs to look in at her mother's room, of which the door stood open. It had a great gaunt wardrobe in it, and an old-fashioned bed with a high screen round one side—the farther one from the door. She put her hand to her throat, for something like a sob came to it—and yet she was so happy. Outside her mother's door, still nearer to the stairs, there was a little room used as a box-place and hanging cupboard; her mother's best dress and a long cloak that she wore in the winter, and many things not often used, were stowed away there, or hung on hooks. She looked at them as if to mark something in her memory, or because of an unconscious knowledge perhaps of a day that had yet to come. As she went down the old polished staircase she heard Hannah moving briskly in the kitchen.

'She is getting some scones ready in case he stays to tea,' Margaret thought, and demurely walked into the best parlour. Her mother was sitting in the chintz-covered arm-chair by the window, and Tom sat facing her near the writing-table. He looked tall and strong and kind, just as he had done in London, and the sight of him made Margaret's heart beat quicker still.

He jumped up and went forward to greet her. 'How do you do?' he said. 'Mr. Vincent told me I might come, you know, and here I am—I heard he had gone.'

His voice was cordial enough, but in the first moment she knew that he was different—different from the morning when he had said good-bye at the Langham, and talked of coming to Chidhurst, and foretold that they would have another drive in a hansom together. He was a little more distant; she felt as if he thought less of her, as if he liked her less, as if he had heard of Mr. Garratt and despised her. It chilled her; she had nothing to say after a bare welcome, and Mrs. Vincent, thinking that now Margaret had come Mr. Carringford would naturally talk to her, was silent too. Then Tom jerked out—

'When are you likely to get a letter from Mr. Vincent?'

'We expect it every day now,' Mrs. Vincent answered, and turned to Margaret. 'Mr. Carringford has ridden over from Hindhead,' she said,

'and I've thanked him for the roses, and told him I couldn't remember the day when I'd had any sent me before.'

'Miss Vincent and I made an expedition together—'

'Oh, yes, we've often talked it over.' Margaret wished her mother hadn't said that, it made the colour come to her face; but luckily Tom was not looking at her. And then Mrs. Vincent added simply, in the half-countrified manner into which, for some strange reason, her speech had relapsed since her husband's departure, 'you'll be tired after your ride, Mr. Carringford; you must stay for a cup of tea.'

'I should like to—if I may.'

'And while it's getting ready, Margaret might show you round the garden, if you'd care to see it?' She said it with the native dignity that was always impressive. It had its effect on Tom.

'I should like to see it very much,' he said, and five minutes later he and Margaret were walking down the green pathway of the Dutch garden. Almost without knowing it, she took him through the gate at the end, the one that led to the wood, across a green corner, through a tangle of undergrowths, and up towards the great elms and beeches, to which she had never gone with any one before, save her father. They hardly spoke on the way, they felt constrained and even shy, but when they reached the top, things seemed to

adjust themselves in their minds, and they looked at each other for a moment, and laughed as if they felt it good to be together again. Then Tom shook off his awkwardness; the boyish happiness was on his face again, and she was almost satisfied. 'I say, what a wood!' he exclaimed.

'It 's father's and mine; we call it our cathedral.'

'Splendid,' he answered. 'When are you coming to London again?'

She clasped her hands and looked at him. 'I don't know, but I want to be there dreadfully. Do you think I could go by myself?'

'Well, no!' He was rather surprised at the question. 'You might come up and stay with the Lakemans: you must make haste about it if you do, for they 're going to Scotland at the end of July—in another month, you know. By the way, I rather think you 'll see them here first. Stringer can't get away again till the middle of August, except for week-ends, and then he has to go to Folkestone: he has a sister there—ill. But the Lakemans told me a day or two ago that they were coming here for a Saturday to Monday; he had offered them the house.'

'When?'

'I don't know when, but pretty soon I expect. Farley is coming too; he has taken a theatre, and is going to produce a legendary thing this autumn, *Prince of*—something, it is called.'

'Will there be a princess in it?'

'I expect so. Why?'

'When Miss Hunstan came out first she walked on the stage holding up a princess's train.'

'They generally begin in that way, you know. By the way, Stringer said that you were walking about the fields with a friend—was it anybody particular?'

The colour rushed to her face, and he saw it. 'It was Mr. Garratt,' she said.

'Who is Mr. Garratt?'

'He used to be a house-agent at Petersfield. He's at Guildford now. He has just taken a house there.'

'A married gentleman?'

'No,' she laughed; 'that's why he comes—he doesn't come for me,' she added hurriedly; but he didn't understand her, or thought it country coquetry perhaps; for of course there was no one else to come for at the farm. He had seen Hannah for a moment before Mrs. Vincent appeared — a queer sort of frump he had called her, and that any one should have come for her would have seemed too absurd.

'Any success?' he asked quickly.

'Not yet; Hannah won't encourage him.'

He walked to the edge of the wood and looked out at the view.

'That's rather hard lines,' he said; 'but it doesn't matter if you make it up to him, of course. I say, that's magnificent,' he went on, nodding

to the distance. 'Do you ever bring Mr.—what is he called—Garratt up here?'

'No,' she answered quickly; 'of course not.'

'Well, you took him across the field?'

'I met him by accident, and Hannah was very angry—' she began, but stopped in sheer confusion. She wanted him to know the truth, but it was difficult to make it clear. It was so odd to tell him the family affairs, she thought, for though they had put a whole world into their first meeting, this was only their second one. At the bottom of her heart, too, she had some of the reticence of her parents, and a curious pride that made her resent giving any explanation of her conduct.

'You seem to be rather afraid of Hannah,' he said. It simply never occurred to him that there could be any question of love-making between Mr. Garratt and Hannah. But Margaret was such a nice girl, he thought; it was a pity she should flirt, for perhaps after all it was only a flirtation, with a local house-agent; it put her on another level altogether from the girl he had known in London. And so talk was not very easy between them again, since each felt a little indignant with the other. 'Are you going to be here all summer?' he asked, when they returned to the garden.

'I suppose so,' she answered, 'unless I go to London. I want to do that more than anything in the world.'

'A romantic elopement with the gentleman we have been discussing.'

'Oh, how can you! He is nothing to me,' she cried passionately. 'It is Hannah—'

'But you are a good deal to him?'

'No, indeed. He only does it to vex me—' She was becoming confused and almost incoherent; but she looked downright beautiful, and he thought it would be a good thing if Mr. Garratt were at the bottom of the sea.

'When is your father coming back?' he asked. His tone was constrained again though he did not know it: it went to Margaret's heart and lodged a dull pain there.

'We don't know till we get his letter,' she said impatiently. Something was wrong with this interview, and it seemed impossible to set it right.

'You must tell the Lakemans when they turn up; then I shall hear.'

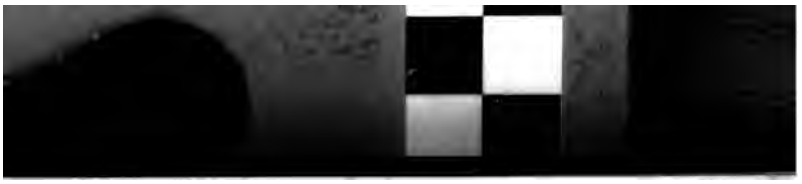
CHAPTER XVI

TEA was ready when they returned, a generous tea set out as usual in the living-room. Tom took his place next to Mrs. Vincent and talked to her gaily, while his eye wandered over the table with the satisfaction of a schoolboy. Margaret remembered what he had said about going into the House of Commons; but he didn't look a bit like a politician, she thought, he was so splendidly young, and he and she had understood each other so well in London. Now he seemed to be bound hand and foot to the Lakemans; and he thought she cared for that horrid Mr. Garratt.

'I like big tea and jam,' he said gaily, as Hannah pushed what she always described as 'preserved strawberries' towards him. This was when the meal was nearly over. 'Do you ever come up to London, Mrs. Vincent?'

'No,' Mrs. Vincent answered; 'but sometimes I have thought that I should like to go with Margaret while father is away.'

'Did you think that, mother dear?' Margaret asked in surprise.



'Better come and stay with me? I could take you both in,' Tom suggested.

Hannah was pouring out the tea, grasping the teapot with a firm hand, and putting it down with determination on the tray when the cups were filled. 'Mother is better where she is,' she said, without looking up.—'Towsey, there is no slop-basin on the table.—I hold with staying at home, Mr. Carringford, though I've sometimes thought I'd like to go up myself for the May Meetings.'

'May Meetings? Of course, I know. I thought you meant races at first—but it is Exeter Hall you are thinking of? I'm afraid Mr. and Miss Vincent didn't go there when they were in town.'

'I'm afraid not, Mr. Carringford.'

'Good Lord, what an ogress,' he thought. 'They had a pretty good time, though,' he said aloud.

'Margaret has told me about it so often,' Mrs. Vincent said, and Tom, turning to look at her while she spoke, realised suddenly that this mother of Margaret, who had grown old and grey, was beautiful. Then he looked round the living-room; his eyes lingered on the black beams and the great fire-place and the red-tiled floor; it made a peaceful picture, he thought, in spite of the ogress.

'Did she tell you about Miss Hunstan?' he asked. 'It was rather lucky coming across her.'

'Oh yes, she told me about her,' Mrs. Vincent answered; 'and how you went to her rooms and put the flowers into the pots. It made me hope — that, and what my husband told me—that some day you would come and see us here.'

'Thank you,' he said simply.

'Who is Miss Hunstan?' asked Hannah.

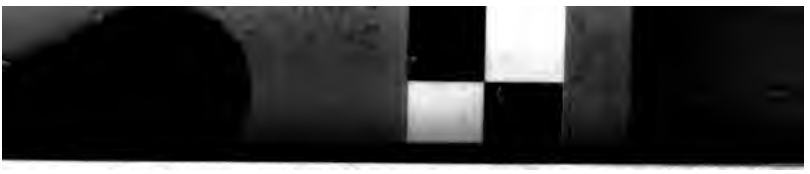
Tom answered beamingly — 'Why, Louise Hunstan, the actress, you know.'

'I didn't know, Mr. Carringford. I don't hold with theatres or any such places, and I was surprised at Mr. Vincent taking Margaret to one. I can't see that people are any the better——' she stopped, for there were footsteps on the pathway outside. A moment later Mr. Garratt walked in with an air of being quite at home.

'How do you do, everybody?' he said. He wore his best clothes and the spats over his shoes. The handkerchief in his breast-pocket was scented more than usual. He took it out and shook it and put it back again, while a whiff of White Rose floated over the table. His hair was tightly curled at the tips, he ran his fingers through it as he took off his bowler hat.

'We didn't expect you, Mr. Garratt,' Hannah said with sudden graciousness, and made room for him beside her.

'Didn't know you had company,' he answered jauntily; 'I hope I don't intrude? Mrs. Vincent,



I hope I see you well? Miss Margaret, your humble servant,' and reluctantly he sat down beside Hannah.

'This is Mr. Carringford, a friend of my husband's,' Mrs. Vincent told her visitor.

'How d' ye do?' Tom looked up and nodded.

'How d' ye do?' Mr. Garratt nodded back, trying to do it easily. 'Thought it was Sir George Stringer at first till I recollected that he was a middle-ager.'

'We didn't expect you to-day, Mr. Garratt,' Hannah remarked, pouring out his tea.

'I told Miss Vincent I should come.' He looked across at Margaret and determined to show off before the stranger.

'I don't remember that you did——' Margaret began.

'Oh, come now, you knew I wanted to bring you that book of poems I told you about. You shall have it if you 're good.'

'You had better give it to Hannah, Mr. Garratt. She will appreciate it more than I shall. I had no idea that you meant to bring it.'

'Well, but what did I say the other night?'

'I don't know,' Margaret answered coldly. 'I never remember the things you say.'

But Mr. Garratt was not to be snubbed. 'Oh, come now, don't be showing off again,' he laughed, and turned to Tom—'Miss Vincent is a difficult young lady, I assure you,' he said, with an air of

quite understanding her. 'But perhaps you've found that out too.'

'How should I have found it out?' Tom asked stiffly.

'Well, you see, I've heard a few things—no jealousy—that's only a joke,' as Margaret flushed and started; 'you are one of Miss Vincent's London friends, I think? It was you who gave her the roses she brought back. You see I know all about it.' He laughed with satisfaction, and gave Hannah a kick under the table from sheer lightness of heart, and by way of keeping everybody in tow, as he called it to himself.

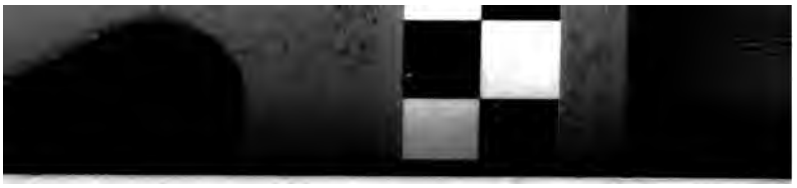
'We certainly bought some roses in Covent Garden,' Tom said, and got up to go. He couldn't stand any more of this chap, he thought.

'I didn't tell you about it, Mr. Garratt,' Margaret said indignantly. 'Oh, don't go, Mr. Carringford.'

'I know you didn't tell me,' Mr. Garratt said with a wink. 'It was Miss Barton who gave me that little bit of information—you kept it to yourself.' Tom had hesitated, but this decided him. Mr. Garratt was not the sort of person with whom he could bring himself to compete.

'Well, good-bye, Mrs. Vincent,' he said, shaking hands with her and then with Margaret and Hannah. He nodded to Mr. Garratt, and strode towards the door.

'But you must wait till your horse is brought



round,' Mrs. Vincent said. 'Hannah, will you tell Sandy or Jim?'

'It is ready,' Mr. Garratt volunteered. 'I wondered whose it was when I went into the stable just now. I'll take you to it, if you like,' he said airily to Tom.

'Pray don't trouble.' Tom answered, hardly able to keep his temper.

'No trouble at all.' Mr. Garratt led the way out as if he were the master of the house, while Margaret looked after them and felt as if she were being tortured.

'Fond of a ride?' asked Mr. Garratt as they went along.

'I suppose so,' said Tom distantly.

'I should like to show you the decent little mare I'm riding. I think sometimes I shall get a fellow to it for Margaret. We are both of us fond of the country and getting about.' He called her Margaret deliberately, and with an air of custom — for it would be better, he told himself, to choke this Johnnie off as soon as possible.

'Would she like it?'

'Rather! Trust her,' with a knowing wink.

'Beast,' thought Tom, as he mounted. 'Well, good evening,' he said aloud to Mr. Garratt, and went off at a brisk trot, wondering how Margaret could stand him.

'He knows how to give himself airs, too,' Mr.

Garratt said to himself, looking after him. 'I 'm rather surprised he didn't offer me a tip while he was about it. I 'd like to take down all these chaps and show 'em the way they should go; but we are doing it,' he added, thinking not of himself but of his class—'and once we 've got the upper hand we 'll keep it, and let 'em see that we can be swells as well as any one else.' He walked slowly back to the house, thinking of Margaret. He was getting up to her ways, he knew how to keep his head cool—and the man who waited won. He liked her, but his feeling was pique, rather than passion, and he felt that to subdue her would be a gratification to his vanity greater than any other he could imagine. 'And she 's such a beauty!'—he always came back to that. 'While there 's a chance of her, I 'd rather be shot than kiss that sour old hen, Hannah. I 'll have Margaret if I die for it. I wish I 'd thought of it and tried to find out if that chap knew anything about Vincent's relations. I expect he 's been up to something, but I don't care—the girl isn't any the worse for it.'

During his absence the storm had burst in the living-room, but luckily circumstances obliged it to be brief.

'I should like to know what you think of yourself now with your slyness and deceit?' Hannah had asked Margaret.

'I 'll not have you speak to your sister in this

way,' Mrs. Vincent said; but her remonstrances had grown ineffectual lately.

'Mr. Garratt told you he was coming, did he, though nobody else in the house knew it?' Hannah went on. 'You took good care that they shouldn't.'

'If he did tell me I had forgotten it,' Margaret answered scornfully.

'You can be trusted to forget anything—if it's convenient. What's this poetry he's brought you, I should like to know?'

'I didn't know he meant to bring it. He said something about Eugene Field's poems the other day, and that he had recited one at a chapel festival.'

The mention of the chapel somewhat mollified Hannah without subduing her jealousy. 'Well, something will have to be done,' she said. 'I'm not going to put up with your conduct, and that you shall find out.' At which point Mr. Garratt entered a little uneasily, as if conscious that things were not going smoothly. Margaret looked up and spoke to him quickly.

'Mr. Garratt, I want to tell you that if you have brought me a book of poems I would rather not have it.'

'Why, what's up now?'

'Nothing is up,' she said, with what Mr. Garratt called her high and mighty air.

'Well, look here——' but she had turned away.

'Mother, shall we go into the garden?' she asked.

'It's a little chilly, this evening,' Mrs. Vincent answered.

'You've taken to feel the cold lately,' Hannah snapped, but anxiously: to her credit be it said that she was always careful of her mother's health.

'I have taken to feel my years.'

'Let us go into the best parlour, darling,' Margaret said tenderly. 'I might play to you a little while. You always like that,' and she put her arms round her mother's shoulders.

Mr. Garratt took a quick step forward. 'I should like to hear you play, too, Miss Margaret, if there's no objection. I'm a lover of music, as I think I've told you.' He stood by the door of the best parlour and waited.

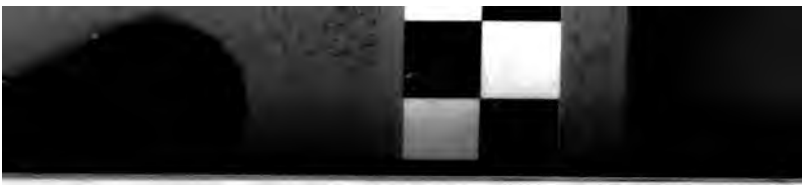
Margaret turned and faced him. 'Stay with Hannah. I want to have my mother to myself,' she said.

'Well, that's a nice handful!' Mr. Garratt remarked as she shut the door, almost in his face, and turned the handle with a click.

'You should live in the same house with her,' said Hannah, 'then you'd know.'

'She might have left it a little bit open at any rate; then we should have heard her.'

'Are you as anxious as all that?' asked Hannah in a sarcastic voice.



'Well, you see, it makes it a bit lively.'

'When I was at Petersfield the other day your mother asked me if I would see that the grass on your Aunt Amelia's grave was clipped. I brought in the small shears, and thought perhaps we might walk over and do it next time you came.'

'Damn my Aunt Amelia's grave!' he said between his teeth.

'Mr. Garratt, you are forgetting yourself!' she cried in amazement.

'She 's enough to make any one forget anything,' he said, nodding towards the best parlour.

'You take far too much notice of her.'

'She doesn't return the compliment, anyhow.'

'And for my part,' said Hannah indignantly, 'I don't understand what it is you come here for.' At which Mr. Garratt faced her squarely:

'Now, look here, Hannah,' he said, 'she gives herself tantrums enough; don't you begin, for two of you in one house would be a trifle more than is needed.' She sat down without a word, and closed her lips firmly. The tip of her nose became a deeper pink. Her eyelids fluttered for a minute quickly up and down. She looked forlorn—even a shade tragic. Mr. Garratt, with his heart reaching out to Margaret, obstinate and determined not to be thwarted, yet felt a touch of pity for the woman before him: perhaps unconsciously he recognised the limitations and the impossibilities of her life.

'There, come along,' he said, half kindly. 'Come along, Hannah.' The sound of her Christian name soothed her considerably. 'Let 's go for a little stroll; but I 'm not going to hang about any one's grave. It 'll be bad enough when I come to my own.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE days went on. Letters came from Mr. Vincent, but they were not satisfactory. His brother was no better; though the end was not likely to be immediate. A specialist from Melbourne had even said that he might go on for another year. Mrs. Vincent's heart sank as she read it. She was a strange woman with a wide outlook, and knew perfectly that Time, which had dealt heavily with her, had tempered the years to her husband; there were days when he looked almost like a young man still; and in secret she fretted over her age. She knew, too, though no such thought had ever entered his head, that it was a little hard on him that he should be tied to a woman older than himself, incapable of giving him the companionship that insensibly he needed. She had not felt well lately, and found vague consolation in the possibility to which this pointed. But she wanted to see him again, even for a little while; then she could be content. Those about her guessed nothing of all this: to them it seemed only that she had grown a little more silent and dreamy than before.

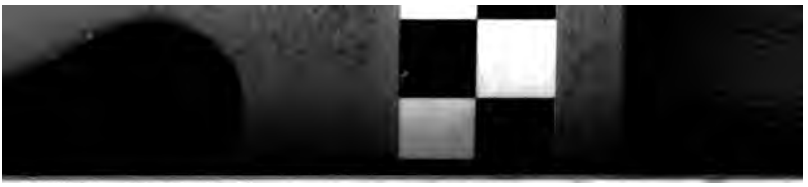
Margaret heard of her father's probably protracted absence with despair. Something must happen, she thought; she herself must get out of the way, or Mr. Garratt must become engaged to Hannah. For matters in no way improved. A sort of struggle was going on. On Margaret's side it was to keep out of his sight, on his to speak to her alone for some uninterrupted minutes; but as yet success had attended neither of them, and his attitude towards Hannah remained what it always had been. Once or twice Margaret had an idea of boldly seeking an interview in order to tell him that his attentions were simply making her miserable, of even throwing herself on his mercy; but something in his manner showed her that Mr. Garratt knew everything already, except the impossibility of his own success.

Meanwhile the fifty pounds, that her father had arranged she should receive every quarter, arrived for the second time.

'You are sure that you want me to have it, mother?' she asked.

'Yes, Margey. I told your father that I wished it.'

'I feel as if I were rolling in wealth.' This was a month after Tom Carringford's visit—a whole month, and there had not been another sign of him—and the last Saturday in July. The midday meal was just over, and Hannah was going to



and fro between the living-place and the kitchen, while Margaret sat in the porch with Mrs. Vincent. 'Mother,' she whispered, 'I have been thinking lately that I would write to Miss Hunstan again.'

'The play-actress?' Mrs. Vincent whispered back, lest Hannah should catch the word.

'Yes, the play-actress,' Margaret said with a laugh in her eyes. 'She is good and sweet—Mr. Carringford's mother loved her. She said again in the letter she sent me that I was to go and see her if I went to London. I want to go soon. I'm afraid she will be abroad if I don't; for she was going to Germany in August.'

'But you can't go till your father returns.'

'I can't stay here unless something to make things better happens. Oh, mother,' she said, fervently, after a pause, 'I do so hate Mr. Garratt.'

Hannah heard the last words and stopped.

'It's a pity you don't tell him so,' she said, 'instead of always trying to draw him to yourself. You make one ashamed of your boldness.'

'He came first because of Hannah, Margey, dear, and is as good as her promised husband,' Mrs. Vincent urged.

'But he hasn't spoken——'

'And never will if you can help it,' Hannah answered quickly. 'Besides, it's my opinion that he doesn't want to be related to an unbeliever—and perhaps something worse. It's just what he

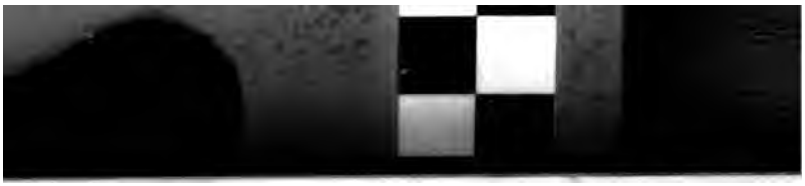
thought would happen about the Australian business.'

'What do you mean?' Mrs. Vincent looked up aghast.

'What I mean is that we don't know anything about—father,' Hannah answered, hesitating before she said the last word. 'We never set eyes on any one belonging to him; we have only his word for it that he has got this brother. For all we know to the contrary he may have married another woman before he came here, and have gone back to her. There is nothing to hold him to what he says, or to help him to choose between right and wrong. For my part, I only hope that I may be out of the place before he comes into it again—if he ever does set foot in it again—for I hate the ground he treads on, and the ground that Margaret treads on too; so now I've said it. It's my belief that the Lord will provide for them both some day according to their deserts.'

Mrs. Vincent rose from her chair and stood with her back to the fireplace. Her face looked drawn and haggard, her lips were almost rigid, but her voice came clear and low. It fell upon Hannah like a lash.

'You are a malicious woman, Hannah,' she said, 'and I am ashamed of you. I know everything about him, and that is enough. I have held my tongue because you have never treated him



as you should, and his affairs are no business or yours. But you ought to be ashamed of your thoughts; and as for religion, it is you that want it, not he. It's the leading of a good life, the telling of the truth, and the thinking well of others that makes religion and will gain Heaven —that's my belief. Those that do different are as good as denying God. I said it to your grandparents long ago, and I say it again to you to-day.' Mrs. Vincent's diction was not always strictly correct, but her meaning was clear enough.

'And I know everything about father,' Margaret said gently, for somehow she was sorry for Hannah. 'And I cannot think why you should hate him—or even why you should hate me.' She went a step out into the garden, and as she stood with her head raised, looking up at the high woods beyond, Hannah felt insensibly that there was a difference between them against which it was hopeless to contend—not merely a difference in looks, but a difference of class. It was one of the things she resented most.

'I know this,' she said, 'that it was a bad day for me when he first walked through Chidhurst village to Woodside Farm.'

'Mother,' said Margaret, trying to change the subject, 'some one has come to the house by the church. I passed it this morning and saw the luggage going in. Mr. Carringford said that Sir George was going to lend it from a Saturday to

Monday to some friends of father's. Perhaps they have come.'

'More of his fine feathers,' said Hannah contemptuously. 'It 's a pity he was left plucked so long.'

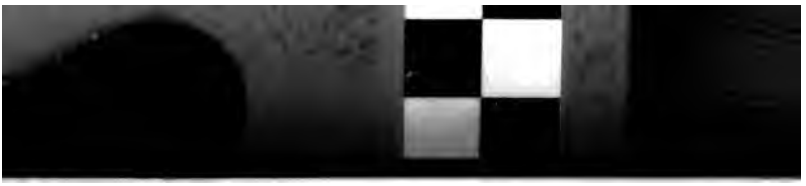
'Hannah, be quiet,' Mrs. Vincent said sternly. 'Go to your work, and don't come to me again till you have learnt respect for those who are better than yourself.' It was almost a command, but Mrs. Vincent had been roused into her old self again—the self of bygone years.

Luckily Towsey appeared on the scene.

'Sandy wants to know whether he 's to be here to-morrow to take Mr. Garratt's horse. You said something about his not coming.'

Hannah hurried out to speak to the old cowman who usually waited for Mr. Garratt's mare on Sunday mornings before going to church.

'Mr. Garratt won't be over early to-morrow,' she said. 'He 's driving a trap from Guildford, and it 'll take him all he knows to get here by dinner-time. If you come up after church, Sandy, it 'll do.' This was an arrangement Mr. Garratt had made rather to Hannah's surprise on his last visit. It would be better than the train, he had explained; but it was a long way, and it would be impossible for him to get to the farm much before dinner-time.



CHAPTER XVIII

MARGARET had guessed rightly. Mrs. Lakeman and Lena, and Dawson Farley, who as usual was with them, were at Sir George Stringer's house from Saturday to Monday, while Sir George himself was at Folkestone with his sister. Dawson Farley rejoiced in the absence of their host, for he had wanted a talk with Mrs. Lakeman, and this visit promised to give him a good opportunity. He was deliberating within himself as they sat together after luncheon whether he should begin it. Lena had slipped away, and wriggled among the greenery.

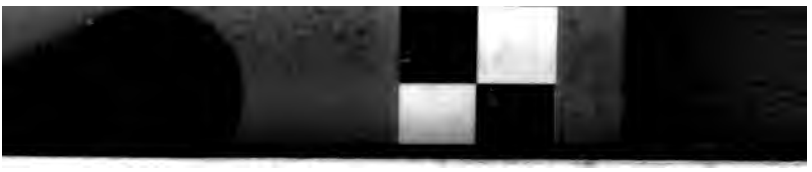
'We'll go over to the farm presently,' Mrs. Lakeman said. 'I want to see what the woman with the look of distinction is like.' Gerald faced it out very well, but I expect he is frightfully bored.'

'Why did he marry her?'

Mrs. Lakeman shrugged her shoulders. 'Poor chap, he didn't care what became of him, but it wasn't my fault—really it wasn't, Dawson. My father made an awful row.' Mrs. Lakeman was always a trifle slangy. 'Besides it wouldn't have

done, you know. Still he took it badly; I was awfully sorry for him.'

Dawson Farley looked at her and nodded absently. He quite understood all she meant to imply, but he was busy with his own train of thought. She was a curious woman, he thought, a curious, capable woman who never bored him, and knew how to do things admirably. It had often occurred to him that it would be an excellent thing to marry her. The worst of it was that he simply could not stand Lena. She was so like a snake with her twisting and squirming, and the malicious things she said with an air of unconsciousness. The mother, on the other hand, was an excellent critic and companion, and would serve his purpose admirably. He was not a bit in love with her—she was too old for that; and it was just as well, for being in love with one's wife was a state that naturally didn't last long. Luckily she was not a jealous woman, and so would not be likely to resent it if he chose to flirt with his leading lady; on the contrary, if he told her all about it, he felt certain it would amuse her, and she had so excellent an eye for home-made dramatic effects that even the worst domestic crisis would be followed by a reconciliation, if only for the sake of contrast. She was a bit unreal, but what did it matter?—the tragedies of life were bound up with realities, but there was comedy to be had from the make-believes.



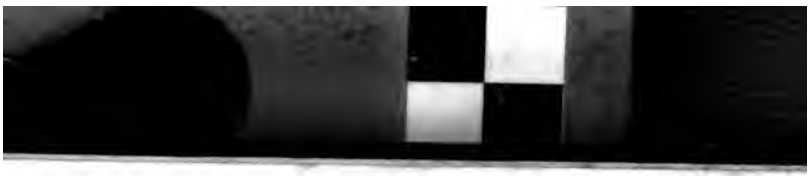
The worst of it was, for his own peace, that at the back of his life there was always Louise Hunstan. He had been in love with her once; but he was glad that nothing had come of it, for he couldn't have endured a wife in his own profession: if she had been a success he would have hated it, and if she had been a failure he would have despised her. He had discovered Louise, that was the hard part of it; she had let go the princess's train to enter his company and gratefully play small parts. They had fallen in love with each other, and happiness and love gave her strength, until, almost unawares, she achieved a reputation. If she had only made it on his advising, if he could have considered it his gift to her, he could have forgiven her more easily and even loved her through it; but she had struck out alone, often contrary to his advice, and made it for herself. In her heart she had laid it at his feet, and rejoiced in it, thinking it would make him proud of her, but it roused a miserable jealousy and drove them apart. He gave her to understand that he did not altogether believe in her success; that it was a fluke, due to the good-nature of the critics and the stupidity of the public, and that it would vanish with her youth and her freshness. She believed him at first, but gradually she saw through him. She cared for him all the same for a time, though it was through a haze of bitterness and disappointment. Then

their engagement collapsed, and he returned to England alone, while she remained in the States through five hard-working years. At the end of them she came back to England. It was then that Tom's mother met her, and took her by the hand, and helped her till she had gained a permanent position. Over here she and Farley had become friends to a certain extent, but he couldn't stand the irritation of her success; he even found a secret pleasure in her occasional failures; and a meeting between them involved an embarrassment of manner that neither could put aside.

After all, he thought, Mrs. Lakeman would suit him much better. He liked her uncertainty of manner, her quick interest in his affairs. They had only known each other a year, but she had become his most intimate friend, his chum and companion; her society stimulated him, he wanted it more and more. Why shouldn't he have it altogether? Only the girl stood in the way; but probably she would marry, for she had a curious fascination for some people, and she had money.

'Is Carringford coming?' he asked. 'I thought you invited him.'

'He dines and sleeps here to-morrow with an old friend—they are staying at Frencham together. I didn't want him here all the time,' she said, significantly. 'He raved quite enough about



Gerald Vincent's girl after those two days she was in town?'

'I thought Stringer found out there was a "young bounder" in the way?'

'Awfully lucky, wasn't it?' Mrs. Lakeman said, triumphantly, and off her guard for a moment. 'Tom came afterwards and saw him too—and was quite choked off. It's extraordinary how completely the Vincents have gone smash.'

But Farley took no interest in the Vincents. 'Carringford hangs about Lena far too much unless something is coming out of it,' he said. 'I should tell him so if I were you.'

'He's coming to us in Scotland on the tenth. They will have opportunities there,' she answered carelessly. 'Let us go and look for her.'

Lena meanwhile was sitting on a grave in the churchyard, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands, looking out towards the Surrey hills, and she too was thinking of Tom Carringford and Margaret. She had been uneasy from the moment they met each other on the Embankment. She had seen Margaret's beauty and Tom's recognition of it, and they were something like each other—well-grown and healthy, a boy and girl that matched. She was not violently in love with Tom herself, but she simply couldn't bear that he should escape her, and on one pretext or another she brought him perpetually to

her side. It was easy enough, for they had known each other since they were born, and Mrs. Lakeman had helped him with the house in Stratton Street when he was left alone in it. Since his father's death and his sister's marriage indeed, Mrs. Lakeman had taken the place of a near relation. He knew that Lena liked him, but it never occurred to him that her feeling was anything more—she always squirmed and looked into people's eyes and called them 'dear.' If it had occurred to him he would probably have proposed on the spot; for there was no particular reason why he shouldn't marry her, except that she was a little too clinging, and too fond of darkened rooms and limp clothes. He liked fresh air and a straightforwardness he could understand: there were many praiseworthy elementary qualities in Tom Carringford.

'He'll be quite happy with us in Scotland,' Lena said to herself. 'We'll sit by the streams or walk in the woods all day; he'll feel that we belong to each other, and he'll tell me he loves me. I think we must be married this autumn, then mother will be free. I wonder if she will marry Dawson Farley.' For Lena was sharp enough, and was quite aware of the actor's vague intentions, little as he imagined it. She looked up at the wood—the crown—in the near distance, and then at the fields that led to the farm. That must be Margaret's wood, she thought, for Tom,

who was frankness itself, had told the Lakemans of his visit to Chidhurst and his walk with Margaret.

Lena would have gone across the fields to the farm; but Mrs. Lakeman, who always had an eye for effect, would not hear of it.

'We will pay Mrs. Gerald Vincent a formal visit,' she said, with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. 'We will put on our best clothes and new gloves, and drive up to the door properly.'

They had hired an open fly for the two days of their visit to Sir George's house. It was better than walking, but it was just a ramshackle landau, and that was all, and the driver was the ordinary country flyman. It happened, though this had nothing to do with the Lakemans, that he was the same man, grown old, who twenty years ago had taken the elder Bartons to Woodside Farm when they went to expostulate with the widow concerning her second marriage. He thought of it to-day as he went down the green lane and in at the farm gates, for afterwards he had come to know with what their errand had been concerned.

Mrs. Lakeman, with Lena beside her, sat on the front seat, Dawson Farley facing them. 'I never believe in treating these people carelessly,' she remarked, as she fidgeted with her lace handkerchief—it was scented with violets—and held back her lace parasol as they drove in at the gates. Then she was almost startled. 'What a lovely

place!' she exclaimed. 'Look at that porch, and those old windows. Gerald's not such a fool after all. And a Dutch garden, too—why, I could live and die here myself.'

'I don't think so,' Mr. Farley said cynically.

'It's just what I thought it would be,' Lena cooed. 'I felt sure that Margaret lived in the midst of flowers.'

They had stopped by the porch. The front door was open, but not a soul was visible.

'You must get down and ring the bell, Dawson.' Mrs. Lakeman was a little puzzled, as if she had expected the inhabitants of the house to run out and greet her. Then suddenly Towsey appeared. Margaret's hint had evidently taken effect, for she wore the black dress that she usually kept for Sundays, and a white apron that met behind her generous waist. Above the porch, from the window-seat of her own room, Margaret, listening and watching, heard Mrs. Lakeman ask in the clear voice that always seemed to have a note of derision in it: 'Is Mrs. Gerald Vincent at home?'

'You are to come in,' said Towsey brusquely.

Mrs. Lakeman trailed into the living-room, followed by Lena and Mr. Farley. She looked at the great fireplace piled with logs and bracken, at the old-fashioned chair on either side, at the oak-table in the middle, and the chest against the wall, then back at the porch and the glorious view beyond it. Within, all was dim and cool and still;

without, summer was at its highest and nature holding carnival. Impressionable and quick to succumb to influences, she was charmed. 'I call this the perfection of peace and simplicity,' she exclaimed, as they stood in a group waiting.

A door on the left opened, a tall figure appeared, and hesitated. Mrs. Lakeman went forward with emotion, just as she had done to Gerald, but there was a shade of fine patronage in her manner this time. 'It must be Mrs. Vincent—' she said, 'dear Gerald's wife.'

Mrs. Vincent looked at her visitor with calm wonderment.

'Yes,' she said simply. 'I suppose you are a friend of his? Margaret thought you might come.'

'I am Hilda Lakeman. You have heard of me, of course?' Mrs. Lakeman's lips twisted with her odd smile. 'You can imagine that I wanted to see you. I made a point of coming at once. We are staying at Sir George Stringer's till Monday.'

'Perhaps you will come in,' Mrs. Vincent said, a little awkwardly. Mrs. Lakeman followed her into the best parlour, and looked round it with surprise. The room was perfect in its way. She had pictured something more common, more comfortless.

'Dear Gerald's books,' she said in a low tone to herself, glancing up at the well-filled shelves, 'and his writing-table and reading-chair,' she

added with a thrill. 'The piano, I suppose, is Margaret's?' she asked, with an air of knowing how to place and value everything; for on a closer inspection she had decided that, after all, Mrs. Vincent was the simple farmer woman she had imagined. She was tall, and in the distance had an air of distinction, it was true; but Mrs. Lakeman felt it to be a spurious one—a chance gift of squandering Nature. Her eyes and mouth were still beautiful, but her hair was grey, her throat was brown and drawn, her shoulders were a little bent. 'She is quite an old woman,' Mrs. Lakeman thought triumphantly, as she walked across the room, listening to the rustle of her own dress, and noting the stuff one, clumsily made—such as a housekeeper might have worn—in which Mrs. Vincent stood waiting to see what her visitors would do next. 'I wonder what she thinks of her prospect of being Lady Eastleigh?' Then, with courteous but extreme formality, and the swift change of manner that was peculiar to her, she said: 'This is my daughter, Mrs. Vincent, she has been looking forward to seeing you; and I have ventured to bring an old friend, Mr. Dawson Farley. I am sure it needs no excuse to present so famous a person to you——'

Mrs. Lakeman stopped, for Hannah had entered, and stood half humbly, half defiantly by the door. She had dressed herself in her best, but the blue alpaca frock and the black alpaca apron and the

white muslin tie round her neck only added to her uneasiness. Her hair was pulled well back, and two horn hairpins showed in the scanty knot into which it was gathered at the top.

'That's Hannah,' Mrs. Vincent explained, 'my daughter by my first husband.'

'How do you do?' Mrs. Lakeman said, and looked at her insolently; 'I am delighted to see you.'

'How do you do?' Hannah answered grimly. 'Margaret thought you'd be coming. Won't you sit down?' She indicated seats to the visitors with an air of inferiority, and a consciousness of it, that was highly satisfactory to Mrs. Lakeman, whose dramatic instincts were fast coming into play.

'Miss—let me see?—it was Miss Barton, I think? This is my daughter Lena, and this is Mr. Farley.' Her manner was almost derisive as she presented them.

Then Margaret entered, tall and hesitating. She stopped for a moment and looked round with the air of a princess.

'Ah! this is our Margaret,' Mrs. Lakeman said, and folded her in her arms. 'I told you we should come—you knew we should, didn't you? It is such a wonderful thing,' she went on, turning to Mrs. Vincent, 'to see Gerald's child.'

'She's a fine tall girl,' Mrs. Vincent answered, looking at Margaret with pride.

'We've come to see you in your home, you little thing,' Lena whispered, and pulled Margaret gently towards her.

'It's very kind of you,' Margaret answered, repelled immediately. 'But if I'm a fine tall girl I can't be very little, can I?'

'You are very sweet,' Lena whispered again, and stroked her shoulder. 'You remember Mr. Farley, don't you, dear?'

'Oh, yes,' Margaret said, shaking hands with him.

'He is staying with us till Monday morning,' Mrs. Lakeman explained. 'Then we are all going back together, very early indeed, in order to catch the Scotch express from Euston.'

'It's not a long stay,' Mrs. Vincent said, with the restraint in her manner that was always impressive. 'The place is worth a longer one. You will come to think so.'

'I dare say, but we must start for Scotland on Monday, and as I never can travel at night we shall leave here by the eight o'clock train in order to catch the day express from Euston. Tom Carringford is coming over to-morrow afternoon,' and she looked up at Margaret with a smile, 'to dine and sleep. He is at Frencham now; but he said he must come and spend to-morrow evening with us, and go up and see us off in the morning.' She wished Margaret to understand distinctly that Tom belonged to them.

'Is he going to Scotland, too?' Margaret asked, rather lamely, for lack of something else to say.

'Not with us. He is so disappointed, dear boy, at not being able to get away, but he comes in a week or two.' She stopped for a moment and turned impulsively to Mrs. Vincent. 'But I want to talk about Gerald,' she said. 'He told you of his visit to us? It was years since I had seen him—Mr. Farley wanted to meet him so much, too,' she broke off to add, always careful to include every one in the room in her talk. They ought to have gone to see him play—he had a magnificent part; but Gerald would take Margaret to *King John*. He thought it would educate her more and amuse her less, I suppose.'

'Is Mr. Farley an actor?' Hannah asked.

'Dawson, that ought to take it out of you!' Mrs. Lakeman laughed. 'There's one place in the world, at any rate, where they haven't heard of you.' And then turning to Hannah, she said impressively: 'He is the greatest actor of romantic parts in England, Miss Barton.'

'It's a thing I am not likely to have heard,' Hannah answered. 'I never entered a theatre or wished to enter one.'

Lena made a little sound of sympathy. 'I always liked the Puritans,' she said. 'They were so self-denying.'

'I'm a very wicked person, perhaps,' Dawson

Farley said in a pleasant voice, that almost won Hannah in spite of herself. 'But all the same, won't you show us your garden, Miss Barton?' It seemed to him sheer insanity to come to the country and stay indoors.

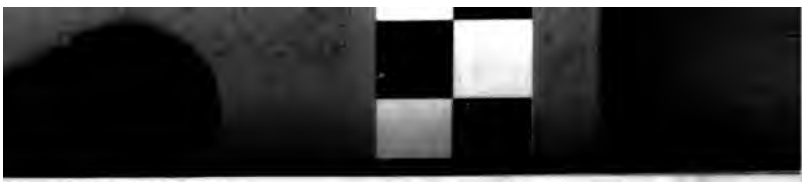
'I wish you would all go to the garden. I want to talk to this dear woman alone, and we have only a quarter of an hour to stay,' Mrs. Lakeman said.

'You'll take a cup of tea?' Mrs. Vincent asked, for it always seemed to her that a visit was a poor thing unless it included refreshment.

'No, thank you; we must get back. Miss Barton is waiting for you, Lena;' she looked towards the door and waited, feeling herself mistress of the situation. The little group trailed out through the living-place to the garden. 'And now tell me,' she went on when they were alone, turning to Mrs. Vincent again, 'what does Gerald say about Cyril? He sent me a little note when he arrived, but he hadn't seen him then.' The note was merely an acknowledgment of a sentimental farewell one she had sent him, but Mrs. Lakeman did not think it necessary to mention this.

'He sent you a note—from Australia?' Mrs. Vincent asked wonderingly.

'Of course he did.' She put her hand on Mrs. Vincent's. 'You know what he and I were to each other once?'



'What were you?' Mrs. Vincent asked, the light beginning to dawn upon her.

'He didn't tell you?' Mrs. Lakeman said in a low voice. 'Perhaps he couldn't bear to speak of it; but he and I were all the world to each other till his opinions separated us. My father was Dr. Ashwell, Bishop of Barford—of course you have heard of him?' Her tone implied that even in these parts her father could not have been unknown. 'He and my mother, Lady Mary, she was Lady Mary Torbey before she married,' —the vulgarity of Mrs. Lakeman's soul was quite remarkable—'were devoted to Gerald, we all were, in fact, and he was devoted to us. But of course it was impossible,' and she shrugged her shoulders.

'I suppose you thought it would have done you harm to marry him, when he didn't pretend to believe what he didn't feel to be true?' Mrs. Vincent said, in her calm direct manner.

'Well, you see—it couldn't be.' The woman was horribly phlegmatic, Mrs. Lakeman thought. She was neither impressed nor jealous; her attitude, if anything, was mildly critical. 'Of course, I wasn't free to do as I liked, as you were. Poor dear Gerald! I know he suffered horribly. That's the worst of a position like ours. One has to accept its obligations,' she added loftily.

'I didn't know that anything need make one unfaithful to the man who loved one, and to whom one was bound by promises.'

'I thought so too; but I couldn't break my father's heart. I have never forgiven myself'—she tried hard to put tears into her eyes, but they would not come—'for I know what he suffered. He was a wanderer for years,' she went on, 'and never able to settle down in London again. I suppose that was how he found his way here. Tell me about your marriage.' She gave a little gasp, as if she had screwed up courage to listen to details that would still be harrowing to her; but a gleam of amusement looked out of her blue eyes. Mrs. Vincent saw it, and, little as Mrs. Lakeman would have imagined her to be capable of it, she understood its meaning.

'I shouldn't care to talk about it to a stranger,' she answered. 'There are things that are sacred outside the Bible as well as written in it.'

'I am not a stranger. I can't be a stranger to Gerald Vincent's wife.' Mrs. Lakeman tried to be passionate, but it didn't come off very well. 'I wouldn't say it to any one else in the world, but I have never ceased to care for him, and I don't believe—I don't believe,' she repeated in a low tone, 'that he has ever quite forgotten me.'

'I don't suppose he has forgotten you,' Mrs. Vincent answered calmly; 'but I am certain that he has been faithful to his wife and child here.'

'Of course he has.'

'And he's loved them all the years he's known them. You let him go when it would have been

inconvenient to marry him; but he didn't marry any one else till he had quite got over it. He's not the sort of man to do anything dishonourable.'

'Of course he isn't.' Mrs. Lakeman began to feel beaten.

'And it's better that what is past and dead should be buried, and left unspoken of. I know'—she looked Mrs. Lakeman straight in the eyes—'he feels that everything was for the best; and he's been content and happy here. He said it not three months ago, and I think you would have done better not to rake up bygones.'

'You are quite right,' Mrs. Lakeman said heartily, for she was a quick-sighted woman and rather enjoyed getting the worst of it; she felt it made good comedy. 'You are a most sensible woman. And now, tell me, won't it seem odd to you to be Lady Eastleigh?'

'I've not thought about it. A living man has the name at present, and I hope he'll keep it.'

'I dare say you would rather he did,' Mrs. Lakeman said, patronage coming into her voice again. 'It would be rather a difficult change,' she added humorously. 'Think of Gerald, Lord Eastleigh, living at Woodside Farm, with Miss Barton for his step-daughter—the Gerald whom I remember with every woman at his feet.'

'I don't see that it would make so much difference,' Mrs. Vincent answered, 'and I hope

he won't call himself by any other name than the one he has been known by. For my part, I never could see why people set so much store on titles. The biggest lord that lives only lies in one grave at last, and it isn't as if Gerald had a son to come after him, or was coming to big estates that had to be thought of. He 'll live here again, and be just the same as he always was.' She looked bravely at Mrs. Lakeman though her heart was sinking, for she knew that the old life at Woodside Farm was for ever at an end. And if he brought this title back with him, might it not cause people to come round him, who had never thought of coming before, who would think her inferior, and let her see what they thought, just as this Mrs. Lakeman did? She couldn't understand it, for the pride of race was in her, too. Had she not come of people who belonged to the land—God's beautiful land—and spent their lives looking after it, faithful to their wives, bringing up their children to do right? There had not been a stain on their records for generations past—neither drunkard nor bankrupt nor anything of the sort had been among them. Suddenly she remembered Mrs. Lakeman.

'Perhaps as you have to go almost directly you would like to see the garden, too?' She got up, and for a moment she looked like an empress putting an end to an interview.

Mrs. Lakeman was carried away by her manner.

'You are a very remarkable woman,' she said, almost generously, 'and the most unworldly person I ever came across.'

'But you see the fashions and things that people care for in London are not in our way,' Mrs. Vincent answered with a smile. 'Are you sure you won't stay for a cup of tea?'

CHAPTER XIX

'LET us sit in the porch,' said Lena, when they came back from their walk round the garden; 'I am quite tired. Take Mr. Farley to see the cows, dear Miss Barton.'

Hannah had showed the glories of the garden herself. It was her place, she thought, and time that she proved it. 'I want to rest—and to talk to Margaret about her lover.' She sat down and held out her hands. 'Do come to me, little Margaret.'

'It's all a mistake——' Margaret began in dismay.

'Who is it that is Margaret's lover?' Hannah asked, looking up sharply.

Lena scented an exciting track, and was happy. 'George Stringer told us about him. He saw them in the fields together.' She put an arm round Margaret, who moved a little way from her with something that was like horror. 'He said you looked so happy together, darling; and you lingered behind the hedge just as lovers always do.'

'He is not my lover, and I hate him!' Margaret exclaimed.

'Mr. Garratt cares nothing for Margaret, I can tell you that,' said Hannah emphatically.

'Oh, but he must,' Lena answered. 'George Stringer said you blushed so sweetly when you took him to the gate, and spoke of him, and then Tom—our dear Tom—told us how Mr. Garratt came to tea, and he was so careful not to say that you had taken him to the wood for fear there should be jealousy.'

'Miss Lakeman, I want you to understand——' Margaret began.

'Darling, you must call me Lena.'

'That Mr. Garratt comes here to see Hannah, my half-sister, and not to see me.'

'Tom said that you and he talked to each other all the time,' Lena pleaded in her sugary voice.

'This is just what I expected, considering the goings on,' Hannah exclaimed, almost losing control over herself. 'But it's not Margaret that he comes to see.'

'No one could come and see any one else when she is here,' Lena whispered to herself; but Hannah heard and answered quickly, for she was fast losing all control over herself.

'She puts herself forward and forces herself upon him.'

'Oh, she couldn't, she looks so sweet. Here

comes Mr. Farley back from his little walk. Shall we ask him if he thinks it 's possible that any one doesn't love her ?'

Margaret turned and blazed at her. 'Please be silent,' she said ; 'you may not mean it, but you say things that are simply dreadful, and they sound as if you said them on purpose.'

'Darling, you mustn't be unkind to me. I 'll ask Tom about it when he comes to-morrow ; and I 'll make him come and see you again if I can,' Lena put on an air of being puzzled and a little injured. 'Only we have not seen each other for three days and I want him for myself, just as Mr. Garratt wants you.'

Margaret went forward and put her hand on Hannah's. 'She 's doing it on purpose, Hannah,' she said, with distress in her voice ; 'and because she sees that it vexes you, and that I hate it.'

Lena was enjoying herself immensely. 'I have made you angry again,' she said ; 'but you look splendid, just as you did in London. Isn't she beautiful, Miss Barton ? '

Hannah could hardly bear it. 'I have never been able to see it,' she said, as her mother and Mrs. Lakeman entered.

'Are you likely to come to London again, Miss Vincent ?' Dawson Farley asked, seeing his chance for a little talk with Margaret.

'I hope I shall, and soon,' she answered. Then she went on eagerly, 'I heard that you saw Miss

Hunstan first when she walked on the stage holding up a princess's train?'

Mr. Farley looked at her curiously. 'There is a princess in my new piece,' he said. 'Do you want to come and hold up her train?'

'I should love it!' she answered, and walked up the grass-covered path with him.

Mrs. Lakeman watched them for a moment, then suddenly turned to Hannah. 'What do you think of your step-father's chance of coming into the title?' she asked.

Mrs. Vincent's lips locked closely together, but she said nothing.

'What title?'—Hannah looked up quickly.

Mrs. Lakeman felt that here was quite a new sensation: she had always been a gambler in sensations, an inveterate speculator in effects.

'You know that your step-father will be Lord Eastleigh when his brother dies?'

'I know nothing about it. Why has a mystery been made of it?'

'There has been no mystery made of it,' Mrs. Vincent said firmly. 'I don't suppose father will take up the title, and, anyway, it needn't be spoken of while the one who has it lives. It seems like hurrying him into his grave.'

But Hannah was not to be silenced. 'I suppose this is why we never heard anything of his relations,' she said. 'Was he ashamed of us?'

'Such a thing never entered his head,' Mrs. Vincent answered.

'And why did this brother who has got a title go hiding himself in Australia? Did he do something he oughtn't to have done?'

'He never did anything but spend his money too quickly,' Mrs. Lakeman answered. 'He made an unlucky marriage of course—dear old Cyril; but heaps of men do that. We must be going, Mrs. Vincent. Some people are coming to tea—the Harfords from Bannock Chase; do you know them?'

'I see them in church, but we have not their acquaintance,' Mrs. Vincent answered. Mrs. Lakeman told Dawson Farley afterwards that she said it with the air of a duchess who had refused to call upon them.

'When are you going to be married, dear?' she asked Margaret as she got into the fly. 'George Stringer and Tom told us about Mr. Garratt.'

'It's all a mistake——' Margaret began, with passionate distress in her voice.

'Don't tease her,' Lena said, 'she doesn't like it.'

Mrs. Lakeman looked at her with an air of worldly wisdom and said significantly, 'I should wait if I were you. You'll be able to do better when your father returns.' She opened her parasol, which was lined with lilac silk—and

framed her face in it. 'Good-bye, Mrs. Vincent, I'm so glad to have seen you.' She made a last effort to put some feeling into her voice and almost succeeded.

But Mrs. Vincent only said 'good-bye,' and turned away almost before the fly had started.

CHAPTER XX

BREAKFAST was always half an hour later on Sunday morning. Margaret had spent the early hours in writing to her father telling him of the impossibility of remaining any longer at Woodside Farm unless the relations between Mr. Garratt and Hannah were definitely settled. Something would have to be done and immediately, but he was not to be distressed about her. She meant to go to Miss Hunstan and to take her advice. Perhaps if she could gather courage she would consult Sir George Stringer, but it was Miss Hunstan on whom she relied; she even asked her father to direct his next letter to her care just on the chance. The morning was sultry, the notes of the birds were languid, there was not a stir among the branches though the scent of flowers came stealing upwards from the bed against the house. She went to the window and leant forward to catch any passing breeze that might chance to wander by. Suddenly Mrs. Vincent and Hannah came out of the porch and stood just a few yards below her. Hannah was evidently continuing a conversation.

'Well, I've no patience with them, mother, fine folks giving themselves airs and ashamed to say who they are and what they've done; lord, or no lord, he shall see that I don't care for his ways, nor for Margaret's either.' All the same there was in Hannah's heart an odd feeling of curiosity. What would happen to her when her step-father was Lord Eastleigh? What would the country people say to her, the people who now and then, most politely, it is true, asked her to accept a present for herself when they paid a quarter's account. And Mr. Garratt, what would he say? He would surely know that Margaret, with her stuck-up ways, would not look at him now. Most likely he would think himself lucky to get Hannah, since she would gain a reflected importance. But she wasn't sure on the whole if she wanted him any longer, and yet it would be something to make sure of a man. She couldn't bear going over to Petersfield and seeing women younger than herself, whom she remembered as girls, walking out with their husbands, or nursing their children, while she remained a spinster. 'I do wonder what Mr. Garratt will have to say to it all,' she said aloud, without meaning it.

'He'll see it's no good caring for Margaret,' Mrs. Vincent said.

'Why should he? Not that he does care,' Hannah answered quickly. 'She isn't any better than she was yesterday, nor than I am. For my

part I think this title business will make us the laughing-stock of the place.'

'There is no occasion to speak of it, Hannah; it's no one's business but our own.'

'I never was one for secrets.'

'Neither was I,' said Mrs. Vincent. 'But I have always found that there was more in silence than in talk. I hope you and Mr. Garratt will settle up matters soon, for these quarrels make me miserable.'

'It's Margaret's fault, not mine,' Hannah answered doggedly. 'After all, mother, whatever's said you know that I'm fond of you. If there had been no strangers about all these years, and I'd had the taking care of you by myself, I could have been content enough without any thought of marrying.'

'Jealousy is such a poor thing, Hannah.'

'We ourselves are poor things in the sight of the Lord, mother. If Margaret would once come to see that she might be different.'

Margaret above could stand it no longer. 'It's so mean to be listening here,' she said to herself; 'and though Hannah was horrid last night she is rather better this morning, and she's fond of mother. Oh, I'm so glad that she really does love her.' Then she raised her voice and called out 'Good morning, mother. I can hear all you say. Let us have a happy Sunday, Hannah. I won't look at Mr. Garratt: I will

be thoroughly disagreeable to him if that will please you.' At which Hannah answered not without a trace of amiability and with the flicker of a smile :

'You had better come down to your breakfast; for my part I never know why we are so late on Sunday mornings.' As she spoke, Towsey tinkled a bell to show that the simple meal was ready.

When the breakfast was over and the things were put away as usual, there was the getting ready in best clothes, and the starting of Hannah and Mrs. Vincent across the fields for church. Mr. Garratt was not coming till midday, and for the first time Hannah took an interest in Margaret's movements.

'I suppose you are going to the wood as usual?' she asked.

'I 'm going there with a book.'

Then, with anxiety in her voice, Hannah said : 'I wish you 'd take a book that would do you some good.'

'It can't do me any harm.' Margaret was delighted at finding her a little softer than usual. 'I 'm going to take *Paradise Lost*—it 's a poem.'

'It sounds very appropriate,' Hannah said solemnly.

Margaret blinked her eyes in astonishment, and wondered if Hannah were making a joke, and on the Sabbath, too! Perhaps as most people are influenced by worldly matters, protest to the

contrary as they will, Hannah was somewhat soothed in her secret mind at yesterday's revelations concerning the Vincent family. To be sure, the Australian brother had gone away, according to Mrs. Lakeman, because he made an unlucky marriage. And Gerald Vincent had lived quietly for twenty years at Woodside Farm: perhaps he, too, considered his own marriage unlucky, and in his heart looked down on her and her mother; but even that would not undo the fact of the relationship, nor prevent the stepdaughter of Lord Eastleigh from being counted a more important person than hitherto when she went to Petersfield. There were moments when Hannah had visions of herself as an aristocrat in an open carriage driving through a park, or going to court in a train and feathers. She had often heard that people wore trains and feathers when they went to court: nonsense and vanity she called it, but the momentary vision of herself trailing along, and the white plumes nodding from her head, was pleasant all the same.

'Well, we'll see when he comes back,' she thought, as she walked across the fields with her mother. 'If he isn't going to call himself Lord anything, and is going to live on here all the same, I may as well marry Mr. Garratt and be done with it, that is, if he behaves himself properly. He's getting a good business round him at Guildford, and we'll hardly rank as trades-

people when they know who I am. Mother,' she said aloud, 'you 'll hardly be staying on at the farm if what this Mrs. Lakeman said is true, and father comes back with a title?'

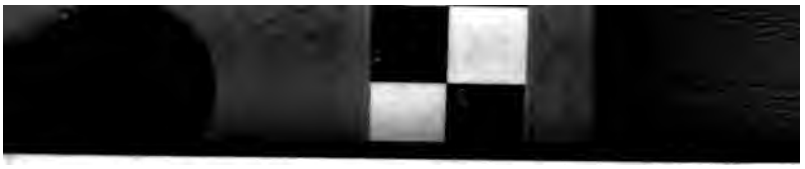
'Nothing will ever take me away from it,' Mrs. Vincent answered; 'and father will be just the same when he comes back whether his brother be living or dead. I 'm sorry you know anything about it, Hannah, for it won't make any difference one way or another.'

CHAPTER XXI

LENA LAKEMAN, haunting the green landscape like an uneasy spirit, watched Mrs. Vincent and Hannah enter the church. Her mother and Mr. Farley were there already. Mrs. Lakeman made a point of going to church on Sunday morning—it was one of the curious things she did; but Lena seldom went: it made her shiver, as a prison might. And that morning she had felt that she could not endure a roof between her head and the summer sky. 'I want to sun myself,' she told Dawson Farley at breakfast; 'the sun was made before the church—God made it for men. Men built the churches for God, it was very dear of them,' she went on in her cloying voice; 'and perhaps they please Him. But in the country they are gloomy little places, I don't see why I should go to them.'

'Neither do I,' Mr. Farley said, for once agreeing with her.

'All the same you will come with me, Dawson; I don't intend to go alone,' Mrs. Lakeman told him in the insolent tone she often found useful when she meant to get her own way—or to be



disagreeable. This church-going at Chidhurst promised to be a bit of quiet comedy. It was the place where Gerald Vincent's wife, arrayed in her best clothes, had sat sermon-listening every Sunday of her life ; the place in which he had been married perhaps. Probably he would be buried outside it some day, if he stayed on at the farm after Cyril's death : she wondered whether they would carry his coffin into the church and read the service, in which he had had no belief, over it. Altogether she felt that the church would give her a glimpse into his memories, a suggestion concerning his life that she did not want to miss. So they went together, she and Dawson Farley. He would rather have sat in the garden and considered the details of his new piece, but after all, he reflected, he could do that well enough in church, and the incongruous elements in Mrs. Lakeman's life always interested him. They sat near the open door. They could see the great beech woods and the Surrey hills in the distance. She turned her face towards them and, generously, she felt the generosity of it, acknowledged to herself the beauty of the landscape. He looked at it too : it sent him messages of his boyhood, of trivial things and homely people, of days that were like a dream, or some previous state of existence, of years that were over and done before he had ever set eyes on the woman by his side. He tried to shake them off, but they came stealing back, and

made him feel that he was an actor and a make-believe outside the theatre as well as in it, and not always satisfied with his part though he accepted it without demur.

Lena meanwhile had gone through the gateway and into the field she had seen Mrs. Vincent and Hannah cross a little while before. She played about in it, searching for clover and counting the blades in a tuft of grass, till, tired out and warmed through and through by the sun, she stretched herself on the ground in the shadow of the out-reaching hedge of honeysuckle that separated the field from the road. 'I feel like a lizard, and I love the earth as much,' she said to herself, and, drowsily closing her eyes, listened to the country voices in the church singing, 'Oh be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands.' The land did rejoice, she thought—in the summer-time. If God would only let the summer last His people would rejoice all the year round—but how could they be religious when the climate was bad? Perhaps one reason why Roman Catholics took their religion so closely into their lives was that it had generated in those places that were filled with sunshine.

The voices had ceased. She tried to remember the order of the prayers, so that she might know how much longer the worshippers had to stay; but she was some way off, and could not hear them with sufficient distinctness to recognise

the words. Suddenly there was the sound of wheels coming towards the church and the road that led to the farm. She sat up and listened, then knelt and looked through the hedge till she saw, going along at a brisk pace, a fat grey pony and a little dog-cart, in which sat a spruce young man with a handkerchief looking out of his pocket, a flower in his button-hole, and a bowler hat stuck jauntily on his head.

'It 's Mr. Garratt,' she exclaimed, 'he is going to see Margaret; they will have a happy time together while the others are at church.' She watched the dog-cart vanish in the distance, then stole along the field, keeping close to the hedge lest she should be observed, for suddenly a thought had struck her. 'Margaret will take him to her wood,' she said to herself. 'Presently I should find them together; but they mustn't see me coming.'

She crossed the second field twenty minutes later and made for the high ground. On the side of the hill a young copse grew, reaching up to the great trees that Margaret called her cathedral; the undergrowth of bracken and briar went up with it and formed a green wall round the summit. Between the columns of the cathedral, and over the green wall the sweet countryside could be seen stretching long miles away to the blue hills that Mrs. Lakeman and Dawson Farley looked at from the church: and

from this point a patch of white here and there suggested a homestead, or a speck of red betrayed a cottage roof.

Lena went up softly and slowly, so that the stir of the vegetation might not betray her, till suddenly she heard voices. She stopped and listened, and went on still more cautiously till there was only a screen of green between her and the speakers. Then she dropped among the bracken and was completely hidden, though she could hear perfectly. Margaret was speaking, and her voice was indignant—

'This is my wood; it belongs to me.'

'Oh, come now!'

'How did you know where to find me?'

'Hannah told me herself; she said you spent your mornings up here instead of going to church, so I thought I 'd just look in.'

Lena, peeping through the greenery, could see that they stood facing each other—Margaret, with her head thrown back, resting one hand against the trunk of a tree. On the gnarled roots that rose high from the ground, and had evidently formed her seat, lay an open book. Mr. Garratt, with a triumphant expression, stood a few paces off.

'You must go back instantly,' Margaret insisted.

'Not I! Come, let 's sit down and have a quiet little talk—we don't often get the chance.'

'Mr. Garratt, please—please go away,' she said firmly, but with a little break in her voice: 'why should you try to annoy me as you do? You came here to see Hannah——'

'Well I don't come now to see Hannah—'

'Then you had better stay away—'

'I should like to stay away if I had you with me. Look here, don't cut up rusty and don't be silly. I'm not a bad sort of chap, you know,' and he tugged at his moustache; 'lots of girls have rather fancied me, but I've never cared a bit for one of them, though I chaff them a little now and then, because I like to make them mad.'

'What you like is nothing to me. I want you to go away.'

'But I mean business this time, I do really. I'm awfully fond of you, and I'll tell 'em so when we get back if you'll say it's all right——'

'It's not all right!' Margaret cried passionately.

'Well, don't take on so—you're awfully pretty, you know.' He went a step nearer. 'I say, give me a kiss to go on with.'

'I would rather die;' and she drew back closer to the trunk of the tree.

'You needn't shudder as if I were snakes or coal tar; you mayn't know it, young lady, but you are not everybody's money, in spite of your good looks. I'm not a stickler myself; still it isn't all plain sailing marrying a girl who won't

go into a church, and whose family is a mystery. It wouldn't add to the business connection, I assure you.'

'My family a mystery?' said Margaret. Lena cocked up her head like a snake and looked through the leaves, she could see them quite plainly. 'How dare you——'

'Oh, well, we won't say anything more about that if you're going to explode. Still, there may be all sorts of crimes covered up for all we know to the contrary, and I understand that the farm will belong to Hannah by and by——'

'And that's why you thought of marrying her, I suppose?'

'Of course it is,' he answered triumphantly; 'but I'd rather have you with nothing at all. I'm very fond of you, Margaret, I am indeed—give you my word.'

'How dare you call me Margaret?'

'All right, then I'm very fond of you, ducky; will that do? And I'll marry you to-morrow if you like—get a special license, wake up the parson, and off we go. You've only got to say the word. Now, come, give us a kiss and say it's all right. I'm not a bad sort, I tell you, and I'm bound to get on, and we'll do all manner of things when we are married—you bet. Come now?'

'Mr. Garratt,' Margaret said in a low voice, 'it's very kind of you to want to marry me, but—but I want you to understand,' and the hot tears

rushed down her flushed cheeks, 'I simply can't bear you.'

'That's a straight one—you do give them out, you know.'

'And I wouldn't marry you for the world; I would rather die,' she went on; 'either you must make it up with Hannah, or you must leave off coming here.' She had brushed away her tears, and, flushed and haughty, looked him imploringly in the face.

'Well, anyhow, don't go on like this, I wouldn't make you unhappy for the world,' and he went a step forward.

'Oh, do keep back!' she said with another shudder. 'I hate you——'

'All right, hate me,' his wounded vanity getting the better of him; 'but I'll have something for my pains at any rate;' and in a moment he had darted forward and tried to clasp her in his arms.

Margaret gave a cry of fright that ended in one of astonishment, for suddenly the vegetation that formed the low wall parted and 'Lena appeared.

'You mustn't be so cruel,' she cooed to Mr. Garratt. He let go Margaret and stood gaping at Lena, who crossed over to the tree.

'I said you would have to love us, little Margaret. I have come to rescue you,' she said, and put her arms round Margaret, to whom it seemed as if her Eden were full of serpents.

'Well, if you don't mind, I should like to know

who the deuce you are, Miss?' said Mr. Garratt astonished, but not in the least confused.

'I 'm Margaret's friend,' Lena answered, still in her most sugary voice.

'And what business is this of yours?' he inquired insolently.

'I know her father and I know her. Darling,' she said, pulling Margaret towards her, 'I told you in London it was always best to tell everything about yourself;' and then she turned to Mr. Garratt. 'She doesn't go to church; it's very wrong of her, but she would go if she were coaxed. Perhaps she 'll go with me some day. And there isn't any mystery about her family. It 's a very very old one, isn't it, dear?' she said, looking at Margaret. 'It came over with the Conqueror.'

'Well, mine may have scudded about with Noah's for all I know to the contrary. What 's that got to do with it?' Mr. Garratt asked.

'He means it for a joke, darling,' Lena said turning to Margaret again. 'He doesn't mean to be rude——' She stood with her arms round Margaret looking with soft reproachfulness at Mr. Garratt.

'Look here, I 'm off,' he said with a sudden inspiration; 'good-morning,' and in a moment he had disappeared down the direct pathway towards the farm.

CHAPTER XXII

HANNAH in the porch saw him coming.

'Mr. Garratt,' she said severely, 'have you been for a walk? I thought I heard the pony go by when we were in church.'

'Yes, I've been for a walk,' he answered huffily, for he was beginning to feel that matters at Woodside Farm were a little too much for him.

'Towsey says you went out directly the pony was put to?'

'That's all right. What then?'

'Where's Margaret?'

'Up in the wood there,' he said, nodding towards it, 'with a young lady who, judging from her conversation, has swallowed a bottle of soothing syrup and let the cork come out inside her.'

'And what did you go up to the wood for?'

'Because I chose. Look here, Miss Barton, I don't want to be cross-examined, if you please.'

'Well, what I should like to know is—to speak plainly—what are you coming here for, Mr. Garratt?'

'That's my business,' he answered. 'If you

like I 'll put the pony to at once and be done with it, though on the whole I should prefer having some dinner first, seeing that I 've come a good way.' After all, Mr. Garratt had a fair temper, for he said the last words with a smile that somewhat pacified Hannah, who, seeing that she was likely to get the worst of it, drew in her horns.

'I didn't mean to be disagreeable,' she said, 'but really it 's difficult to understand all the goings on here.'

'That 's just what I think. Who is that girl with Margaret? She was just like a snake springing up from the green and wriggling about —said she knew Vincent.'

Then Hannah, being somewhat further pacified, told him the history of yesterday's visit.

'Well, I'm jiggered,' Mr. Garratt answered after a moment's hesitation. 'I told you there was something behind it all. This brother of his, Lord Eastleigh—of course I 'm on to him directly. He was an awful rummy lot—married Bella Barrington who used to sing at the Cosmopolitan in the Hornsey Road. A pretty low lot, I can tell you. Well, I am——'

'Mr. Garratt,' said Hannah horrified, 'they are a set of people we should have nothing to do with.'

'Rubbish. Margaret will be a toff.'

'There 's no money with it.'

'Well, that's a pity,' he said, 'but it won't take the title away from them. I always knew they were somebodies.'

'Hannah,' said Towsey, coming from the kitchen, for it was only to Margaret that she gave a respectful prefix, 'I'm ready for you to mix the salad.'

'You'd better go,' said Mr. Garratt, 'I've got no end of an appetite—I'll just take a stroll to the end of the garden to improve it.' For as Hannah turned her head he had seen Margaret coming towards the gate of the Dutch garden, and Mr. Garratt was a politic young man.

'Miss Margaret,' he said deferentially, 'I want to apologise for what I said just now about your family and about your not going to church—it was my feelings that carried me away. I've just heard who you are. I always said you looked like a somebody; you may remember that I told you so that day going across the fields. And as for not going to church, why, I quite agree with what I believe Mrs. Vincent thinks, that it's what one does outside it that matters, not what one does inside.'

'It's very kind of you to say all this, Mr. Garratt, but please let me pass.' He walked beside her down the green pathway.

'You know what my feelings have always been,' he said; 'and if true devotion——' he felt as if this were the right line.

'Please don't say anything more.' She was impatient, and almost distressed, for through the porch in the dim background of the living-place she could see Hannah's wrathful figure.

'If true devotion counts for anything,' he went on, 'why, you'd get it from me. I understand there isn't any money to come with this title, and it isn't going to make a difference in any way, and you'll want some one to love you just the same. We all want that, Miss Margaret, and——'

'Margaret, you'd better come in and not keep dinner waiting,' Hannah called shrilly. 'I should have thought you had had enough of Mr. Garratt, meeting him up in the wood when other people were in church.'

Mr. Garratt was very silent at dinner. He had to decide on his own course of action. He came to the conclusion that the safest plan was to propitiate everybody; but it took his breath away to think that he, Jimmy Garratt, house-agent of Petersfield and Guildford, grandson on his mother's side of James Morgan, grocer at Midhurst, wanted to marry Miss Margaret Vincent, as he now described her to himself: still, there would be nothing lost by going on with it, besides, he was a good-looking chap, lots of girls liked him, and why shouldn't Margaret? After all, she hadn't any money. It would be a good move, he thought, to get her over to Guildford

and let her see the house; it had a real drawing-room and a conservatory going out of it, and, if things went right with her, he could afford to spend a little money. She should have anything she liked; and if people got on in these days it didn't matter what they were in the beginning. There were lots of them in Parliament who were nobodies, why shouldn't he get into Parliament too some day, he had always been rather good at speaking, and for matter of that he might have a title of his own in the end? He had only to make money, get his name into the papers, and give a lot to some charity that royalty cared about, and there he'd be.

'You are very absent to-day, Mr. Garratt,' Hannah said as she gave him a large helping of raspberry and currant tart.

'It's very warm, Miss Barton, very warm indeed.'

'I always find,' said Mrs. Vincent, looking up, 'that the summer is a time for thinking more than talking.'

'You are right, Mrs. Vincent; don't you agree, Miss Margaret?'

'I don't know,' Margaret answered carelessly. 'The summer is lovely, of course; it always seems as if the world had rolled itself up a little bit nearer to Heaven——'

'I thought you didn't believe in any such place,' said Hannah sharply.

Mrs. Vincent looked at her younger daughter with fond eyes. 'One's heart sometimes believes one thing and one's head another,' she said. But Margaret ate her tart in silence, and Mr. Garratt, still weighing the chances of his future, followed her example.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Sunday tea was over. Hannah had successfully monopolised Mr. Garratt all the afternoon. He was becoming desperate: 'She would drive a fellow mad,' he thought; 'why, the way she tramps into that kitchen with the tea things is enough to send any one a mile off her track. I should get the staggers if I married her; besides she wouldn't let one call one's soul one's own by the time she was forty.' He looked towards the door of the best parlour. Mrs. Vincent and Margaret were there; he got up and went in boldly. 'May I venture to ask for a little music?' he asked.

Margaret had risen quickly as he entered. 'Oh, but it 's Sunday,' she answered.

'I thought, perhaps, there wouldn't be any objection to something sacred,' he urged. His manner was respectful, altogether different from that of the morning, and he had been attentive to Hannah all the afternoon—which was soothing to Margaret.

'We used to sing and play hymns on Sundays in mother's time,' Mrs. Vincent said; 'the old piano was only given to the school when James died.

It was worn-out and I thought they 'd be glad of it.' The sequence was not quite clear, but no one perceived it. 'I wish you could play hymns, Margey.'

'Oh, but I can play something that is quite beautiful,' she answered, and went towards the piano.

'Allow me,' Mr. Garratt said, opening it.

He stood behind her in an attitude that he took to be effective, while Chopin's magnificent chords rolled up—to Gerald Vincent's books, and down to the grey-haired woman in the chintz-covered chair, before they stole out of the open window into the Dutch garden and towards the indefinite wood beyond, as if they sought the cathedral.

'Margaret,' cried Hannah, hurrying from the kitchen, 'close the piano at once. Sunday is no time for playing.'

'It's nothing frivolous,' Margaret explained: 'it 's a funeral march.'

'I 'll not have it done,' Hannah said doggedly, always jealous of Margaret's accomplishments. 'There 's a shake in it only fit for week-days.'

'People used to be buried on Sundays; what harm can there be in a funeral piece?' Mrs. Vincent asked.

'It was played at my request, Miss Barton,' Mr. Garratt said loftily. 'I 'll ask for it on a week-day, Miss Margaret. I shall be here again soon,' he added in a lower tone.

Hannah went up to the piano, locked it and put the key into her pocket. 'Mr. Garratt,' she said, turning upon him, 'I think you had better make up your mind who it is you come to see, week-days or Sundays, then we shall know.'

'I've known all along,' he answered, casting prudence to the winds.

'Then you'd better speak and be done with it.'

'It isn't you, Miss Barton, so now you know.'

Mrs. Vincent stood up and looked at him, grave and distressed.

'And, pray, who is it?' Hannah asked; it seemed a needless question, but nothing else suggested itself and something had to be said.

'Well, since you want to know, it's Miss Vincent. I've been in love with her from the first moment I set eyes on her, and that's the truth. As for you, Miss Barton, your temper is a little more than I can stand, and I wouldn't be hired to live with you.'

'Mr. Garratt——' Mrs. Vincent began.

'Mrs. Vincent,' he said, turning round on her sharply, 'let me speak. I came here to look after Miss Barton, I frankly confess it; but I wasn't in love with her, I only wanted to be; and I've found out that I can't be. It's no good, her temper is altogether more than I could risk, so now I've said it.'

'Hannah, it's not my fault,' Margaret whispered,

going towards the door, and feeling that absence would be the better part of valour.

'Stop, if you please, Miss Vincent,' Mr. Garratt exclaimed. 'May I beg you to remain a minute?' He shut the door and stood with his back to it, facing the three women before him boldly: Mrs. Vincent in calm astonishment, Hannah petrified, but scarlet with rage and dismay, and Margaret feeling that a crisis had indeed come at last, and not able to restrain a little unwilling admiration for Mr. Garratt's courage. 'I want you to hear what I have to say,' he went on; 'Mrs. Vincent, I love Miss Margaret. I think she is the most beautiful girl in the world—the most beautiful young lady she would like me to say perhaps; but I can't see that what I have heard about her to-day makes any difference. I told her what I thought of her this morning in the wood before I knew anything about her family——'

'Oh!' came a note of rage from Hannah.

'And I've told her so at every other chance I've had of saying it, which hasn't been very often, for she wouldn't give me any, and Hannah has kept hold of me—as tight as a dog does of a rat. But I love Miss Margaret, I love the ground she walks on, and I'll marry her to-morrow if she'll have me——' Mr. Garratt had become vehement.

'I wouldn't—I wouldn't—' Margaret said under her breath, but he took no notice.

'And I'll never give up the hope of her. I'm happy to hear that though she's likely to be the daughter of a lord, she's not likely to have any money, so it can't be thought that I'm looking after that. I don't want a penny with her. I understand that the farm is going to be Miss Barton's, and I hope she'll keep it. I want Margaret, and I want her just as she is, and without a penny. I don't care what I do for her, nor how hard I work. I can make her comfortable now—and I'll make her rich some day——'

'Mr. Garratt, it's all impossible!' Margaret broke in.

'You say so now, Miss Margaret,' he answered; 'but when you come to think it over perhaps you'll feel different. And you'll see that in talking to Hannah I've only been trying to do what I came to do, but I can't go on with it, and there's an end of it. It's no good saying I don't love you, for I do, and I don't see why I shouldn't say it either. I'd do anything in the world to get you, and everything in the world when I had got you. I'm going away now,' he said quickly, opening the door, 'but I'll write to you to-morrow, Miss Margaret, and you'd better think over what I say in the letter. You needn't think you'll be standing in Hannah's way, for I'd rather be roasted on a gridiron than marry her. Good-night, Mrs. Vincent, I hope you'll forgive

me. Miss Barton, I wish you a very good evening. I know the way to the stables, and can put the pony to myself.' He stood holding the door to for a moment, then opened it and with something like real passion in his voice—it swept over his listeners and convinced them—he added: 'Miss Margaret, I'm not ashamed of it, I'm proud of it, and I look back to say before every one once more that I love you, more than I ever thought to love anybody in the world, and I'd rather marry you than have ten thousand a year. Good-bye.' He shut the door and a minute later they saw him go slowly past the window on his way to the stable.

As if by common consent they waited and listened for the sound of Mr. Garratt's departing wheels. It seemed to form an accompaniment to Hannah's wrath, which burst forth with his departure.

That night, while Hannah was still testing the bolts below, Margaret went softly into her mother's room.

'Mother, dear,' she whispered, 'I want to tell you something, and you mustn't be unhappy, you must just trust me, darling; I shall never be in Hannah's way again, for I shall go to London.'

'It would break my heart!' Mrs. Vincent said, with almost a sob. 'I'm growing old and not so

strong as I used to be. I couldn't bear to part from you.'

'But, mother dear, I cannot stay here any longer.' She lifted her mother's hands and kissed her fingers. 'I cannot, darling!'

'But where would you go in London?' Mrs. Vincent asked, for she herself felt the impossibility of peace at Woodside Farm while Margaret remained and her husband was absent.

'I shall go to Miss Hunstan first. Sometimes I think I should like to try to be an actress too.'

'You mustn't, Margaret!' Mrs. Vincent cried in terror, 'Hannah would never let you enter the house again, for she says that play-actors come from Satan and go to him again when their day is done.'

Hannah came upstairs and stood in the doorway. 'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'Leave me alone,' Margaret said gently. 'To-morrow I shall go to London.'

'And what will you do there? You that never did a day's work in a week, or said a prayer on Sundays, or asked a blessing on a meal, and that belong to those who are ashamed to let people know what they are. Is your head turned because Mr. Garratt has been carried away by your ways and artfulness?'

'I'll leave him to you, Hannah, and go away to-morrow.'

'I'll take care you do nothing of the sort. You

will just stay here till your father comes back and learn to behave yourself.'

Margaret made no answer. She pushed her mother gently down into the big chair by the wardrobe and knelt by her, and kissed her grey hairs and the thin face and the muslin round her throat and the fringe of the shawl that was about her shoulders.

'Come, get to your bed,' Hannah said; 'we don't want to be kept here all night.'

'Good-bye,' Margaret whispered to her mother, kissing her softly once again: for something was shaping itself in her mind, an idea that had come suddenly. She rose and slowly walked away. 'Good night,' she said to Hannah over her shoulder as she went to her own room.

'I 'll lock her up if I have any nonsense with her,' she heard Hannah say as she shut the door.

Margaret sat for a long time thinking. 'It will be better to go at once,' she said at last. 'Hannah might prevent me in the morning; there would be another scene, and it 's enough to kill mother, I can't let her bear it any longer. The Gladstone bag her father had given her in London was at the top of the cupboard in the wall. She took it down and opened it. It was not very large, and luckily it was light; she felt that she could carry it quite well to the station. She put together the things that would be wanted for immediate use; luckily the bag held them all.

Then she drew forward a chintz-covered trunk that stood at the foot of her bed, and packed the rest of her clothes into it. At the far end of the room there was a little old-fashioned bureau; and in a card-board box at the back of a pigeon-hole were the two quarters' money that had come since her father went away. It was in five pound notes. She took them out and looked at them; thin and crisp, they seemed like a fortune. 'It will comfort mother so to think that I have all this money,' she said to herself. 'She 'll know that I must be safe—Oh my darling! I 'll write to you, and leave the letter where they 're sure to see it directly they find out that I am gone.' She opened her blotting-book and saw a sheet of paper that she had spoilt on the day she wrote to Miss Hunstan. It set her thinking of Tom Carrington and that dreadful tea at which Mr. Garratt had put in his remarks. The remembrance of that day and of her mother as she had left her just now, grey-haired and with the woollen shawl about her shoulders, sitting in the big chair by the wardrobe, somehow drew together and made a picture in her mind; and suddenly she broke down and sobbed. After all she was only a girl and very lonely, and as yet the world was full of mysteries to her. Perhaps the tears made her feel better, for she took up her pen and tried to think of words that would comfort her mother; but a little incoherent letter was all she could

manage. She gave her Miss Hunstan's address, and said she would write again as soon as possible and every Sunday morning, and that she would love her every hour, she was her own girl and would try to be worthy of her. When the letter was done she laid it on the little black mahogany table, put on her every-day cape and hat, and took up her bag.

Then she looked round incredulously. It was such a strange thing to leave the house in the middle of the night, she could hardly believe that she was awake. She opened the door very cautiously and listened, but all was dark and still, save for the ticking of the old-fashioned clock in the passage below. She went softly down, waited and listened again, but no one had heard her, along the passage to the back door, for there were not so many bolts to it as to the front one, and it could be opened more gently. The key was hanging on a hook, she took it down, turned it in the lock, drew back the one long bolt, and stepped outwards. The summer air came soft and cool upon her face, but the sky was clouded. She drew the door to, locked it outside, and slipped the key under it back into the passage, and stood a fugitive in the darkness. She grasped her bag tightly and went softly over the stones that were just outside the back door, and so round to the garden, down the green pathway and through the gate; it closed with a

click and she wondered if Hannah heard it in her sleep; across the field and over the stile—she thought of Mr. Garratt—into the next field, and then suddenly she realised the folly of this headlong departure. She might at least have waited till the morning, for there was no train till six o'clock. She had five or six hours in which to walk as many miles. She sat down on the step of the stile and strained her eyes to see the trees that made her cathedral, but they were only a mass of blackness in the night. She left her bag by the stile, and went back across the field to the garden gate, and looked at the house once more, and at her mother's darkened window, and then back again to the stile, and waited by it thinking and listening to the strange little sounds of the night. And presently the natural exultation of youth came over her.

'I'm going to London,' she said breathlessly, 'to seek my fortune just as Dick Whittington did, and as Lena Lakeman said I ought to have done.'

She stooped and felt the grass—it was quite dry, she placed her bag as a pillow, pulled her cloak round her and stretched herself out to rest for an hour or two on the soft green ground. 'Oh, if mother could know that I was lying here in the fields, what would she say? And oh! it's lovely to feel the cool air going over my face, and I have a sense of being free already.'

But sleep would not come; she was restless and excited, and it seemed as if the shadows of all the people she had known crowded about her. She could feel her mother's hand upon her head, hear Hannah scolding, and see her father holding aloof—till she could bear it no longer. She sat up and looked round; the dawn was beginning, in the dim light she could see the green of the grass.

'Dear land,' she said, as she put her head down once more; 'when shall I walk over you again towards my mother's house?'

CHAPTER XXIV

MARGARET's heart beat fast as the hansom stopped at the house in Great College Street. Mrs. Gilman opened the door.

'Miss Hunstan went away on Saturday night, miss,' she said; 'she 's gone to Germany for three weeks.'

'Oh, yes—to Bayreuth; she said she might go, but I didn't think it would be so soon,' and Margaret stood dismayed.

'Is there anything I can do, miss? You are the young lady that came that morning with Mr. Carringford, and put out the flowers?'

'Yes—yes! I thought Miss Hunstan would advise me,' Margaret answered desperately. 'I have come to London alone this time, not with my father, and I want to live somewhere.' For a moment Mrs. Gilman looked at her doubtfully.

'You are very young to be alone, miss,' she said.

'Oh, yes, I'm very young; but that has nothing to do with it.'

'And you have no friends in London?'

'I'm afraid they're all away,' Margaret answered.

'Mrs. and Miss Lakeman are going to Scotland to-day.'

'I know them,' Mrs. Gilman said, her face brightening; 'and you know Mr. Carringford, too?'

'Oh, yes. I stayed at the Langham Hotel with my father,' she went on; 'but I am afraid to go there now—alone.'

'I have a bedroom and sitting-room, perhaps you would like them, miss? They are the drawing-rooms. Miss Hunstan took the lower floor because it was easier to come in and out. I don't know if they'd be too expensive?'

'Oh, no,' said Margaret, 'I have plenty of money,' for it seemed to her that she had an inexhaustible fortune; and as this was a pleasant statement, Mrs. Gilman invited her in with alacrity. In less than an hour she was installed in two wainscoted rooms—as comfortable, if not as dainty, as Miss Hunstan's beneath, and Mrs. Gilman had explained to Margaret that she had known Miss Hunstan ever since she came to England, and had often gone to the theatre with her or fetched her back. And Margaret had told Mrs. Gilman that she wanted to be an actress too.

'In time, miss, I suppose,' Mrs. Gilman answered, with a motherly smile. Then when a telegram had been despatched to Chidhurst—for Margaret felt that her mother's heart had

been aching all the morning—and when she had had breakfast alone in her own little sitting-room, she felt that she had indeed set out on her way through the world. She determined to make no sign to Mr. Farley till the Lakemans had arrived in Scotland—they were to start at ten o'clock that morning from Euston. To-morrow it would be safe, and she would write and ask if he would let her 'walk on' as Miss Hunstan had done once.

But suppose he refused, what then? Suddenly there flashed upon her the remembrance of the dramatic agency in the Strand, that she had seen advertised when she was at the Langham. If Mr. Farley could do nothing for her the agency might be useful; it had said that engagements were guaranteed. A spirit of adventure made her determine to try and find it that very afternoon. It was in the Strand, where her father had bought her the Gladstone bag, and in the odd way that trifles sometimes lodge in one's memory, the number of the house had remained with her. But now she was tired out with the long excitement and the night beneath the sky: she put her brown head down on a pillow, and in ten minutes was fast asleep.

The world seemed to have adjusted itself when she awoke, and life to be a pleasant eager quantity: altogether she felt better, and thought hazily that perhaps some day she might grow

famous and her mother would be proud of her, and—for her thoughts had a way of swiftly going to him—Mr. Carringford would be surprised. Even if he were married to Lena he would still remember the morning they had spent together, the half hour in the little room below, and he would stop and listen when he heard her name, and think of that happy morning long since. She asked Mrs. Gilman for Miss Hunstan's address and wrote to her before she went out, telling her all she had done and wanted to do, and asking for her advice.

Then she went in search of the agency. It was on a second floor up a dirty staircase; she stopped to gather courage, and gave a feeble knock at the door, on which was painted in white letters, 'Mr. Baker, Theatrical Agent.'

'Come in!' said a voice. She entered, and found a large room hung indiscriminately with play-bills and advertisements. At a writing-table placed across the window sat a man of forty, with a florid face and a bald head. In an easy-chair by the fireplace was a woman, expensively and rather showily dressed. Her large grey eyes were bright but expressionless. She had a quantity of fair hair done up elaborately; the colour on her cheeks did not vary; she might have been any age between twenty-eight and forty. Leaning against the fireplace was a young

man, clean shaven and well-dressed. Margaret heard him say :

'Certainly not, I won't pay a penny. If a manager has no faith in it he can leave it alone.'

'You won't get any one to risk it,' the woman said with a laugh. 'Regeneration never pays——' she stopped as Margaret entered, and did not try to disguise the admiration into which she was surprised.

But Margaret felt that it would be impossible to speak before her. 'Perhaps I had better come another time?' she said hesitating. The young man by the fireplace looked at her intently, but he took the hint.

'Good morning, Baker, I'll come round later,' he said, and with another look at Margaret departed.

The man at the desk turned to her. 'Now, madam, what can we do for you? You can speak before Miss Ramsey—in fact,' he added, with a smile, 'if you've come about an engagement, she might be able to give you some advice.' Margaret glanced quickly at the woman and then round the ugly office, and as she did so a little of the glamour of the stage seemed to vanish. Only for a moment—then her courage came back, and hope, which is never fickle long to youth, stood by her. This office was not the stage, not even its threshold, she thought; it was only the little narrow street, dreary and

ill-kept, that branched off from the main thoroughfare.

'You look as if you'd come from the country,' Miss Ramsey said. Her voice showed a desire to be friendly.

'Yes, I have come from the country,' Margaret answered. She turned to Mr. Baker again, 'I want to go on the stage,' she said, 'and understood that you could give help and advice.'

'Certainly;' he spoke in a business-like tone, and opened a book beside him. 'We charge one guinea for entering your name.'

She looked at him, and a smile came to her lips. 'I want to know first what you can do for me.'

Mr. Baker came to the conclusion that she was not so foolish as he had imagined. 'We can do everything for you, my dear young lady, but you must give us a reason for taking an interest in you. We don't give advice gratis'—

The door opened and a man entered. 'Can you tell me,' he asked, referring to a note-book—'where *The Ticket of Leave Man* was played last, and whether Miss Josephine de Grey, who came out in the provinces last year, has had any engagements lately?'

Mr. Baker consulted two books from a shelf behind him and answered off-hand, '*Ticket of Leave Man*, Prince of Wales's Theatre, Harrogate, 22nd last February, for a week. Miss

Josephine de Grey played five nights at the Royalty this March; engagement came to an end in consequence of the non-success of the management.'

'Thank you,' the man said, put down a fee, and departed.

The incident had its effect on Margaret. 'I will pay the guinea,' she said. 'Would you tell me how I am to begin?'

He took up the book once more—'Margaret Vincent—really your own name, is it?—tall, graceful, good-looking. Shall we say nineteen? Would you like to play boys' parts?'

'Certainly not.'

'Burlesque or singing parts?'

'No, I want to act, or learn to act, in real plays. Some day I want to play in Shakespeare's'—it was sacrilege to mention his name in these surroundings. 'Of course I know I must play very small parts at first.'

'Any one to back you with money?'

'No.'

'Any friends among the aristocracy or the press?'

'No.'

'She'll soon have them,' said Miss Ramsey, with a laugh, which Mr. Baker echoed in a manner that Margaret found particularly offensive.

'I quite agree,' he said. 'And you don't know any one in the profession?' he asked her.

'I know Mr. Dawson Farley, and Miss Hunstan a little.'

His manner changed altogether. 'My dear young lady, what could be better? They are at the top of the profession.' He closed the book as if he wanted time for reflection. 'Our fee for appearance without salary is two guineas; with salary, ten per cent. I think you said Great College Street, Westminster—secluded and near the Abbey—very nice indeed,' writing down the address. 'You might call again, Miss Vincent, or you shall hear from us,' and he closed the book.

Margaret turned quickly to the door, giving Miss Ramsey and Mr. Baker a little haughty nod between them.

'I don't think much of the young lady's manner,' Mr. Baker said when she had gone; 'but her face ought to be a fortune. I wonder if she really knows Farley?'

Miss Ramsey got up and looked at herself in the fly-blown glass and at the dirty cards stuck in its frame. 'Wish I were as young as that girl —I'm tired of playing in rubbish,' she said.

'Why don't you ask Farley to give you something?'

'No good. I can't stand his patronising ways.'

'Make Murray write you a part.'

'Bosh! He read me an act of one of his plays, long-winded talk and nothing to do, too

much poetry, and not enough—not enough bigness for me. I want something to move about with in a play. Besides, he won't risk any money even on his own stuff; too platonic for that—platonics are always economical. Ta-ta.'

'Have a whisky and soda?'

'No, thank you,' and she, too, disappeared down the dirty staircase.

CHAPTER XXV

It was five o'clock when Margaret knocked at the street door in Great College Street again.

'There's a lady waiting for you,' Mrs. Gilman said, as she let her in.

'A lady!' Margaret exclaimed, and hurried upstairs. In the drawing-room sat Hannah; she wore her blue alpaca frock and black straw hat with the upstanding bow on one side; she had thrown aside her cape, and the moment she saw Margaret she started and took off her hat as if to prepare herself for the fray.

'Well,' she said, 'this is a pretty thing to do, isn't it?'

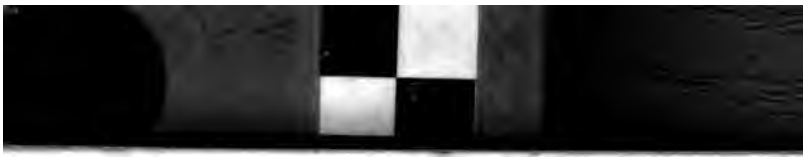
'It was the best thing to do,' Margaret answered, standing still, with her back to the door.

'Was it? Well, you'll just come home with me this very minute.'

'It was very kind of you to come up, Hannah; but I'm going to stay here.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort.'

The determination in Hannah's voice put the bit between Margaret's teeth. 'I am going to stay here,' she repeated.



'Either you come home this minute,' replied Hannah, who had made up her mind that a firm policy was the right one to use with Margaret, 'or you don't come at all.'

'Then I don't come at all, till my father returns.'

'And that won't be for another year, if then. There was a letter this morning which showed it plain enough.'

'Very well, I'll come back and take care of our mother when you are married.'

Hannah turned pale with rage. 'Now look here, Margaret,' she said, 'you will please understand that I don't want any taunts from you. You've taken good care to put an end to all that for ever. It's my belief that you think Mr. Garratt is going to follow you up to London.'

Margaret raised her head quickly: 'I don't want Mr. Garratt,' she said. 'I won't let him know where I am, I promise you that; and if he finds out, he shall not enter the house. He lost his temper yesterday, but he didn't mean any of the things he said; and now that I'm away he'll come back to you.'

'I'll take good care he never enters the place,' said Hannah. 'Perhaps you don't know that he's written you a letter? I could tell his handwriting on the envelope, though he has tried to alter it.'

'You can open it and read it, or give it back to him, or put it in the fire,' Margaret answered.

Then, hoping to pacify her a little, she changed the subject. 'It's such a long way for you to have come; won't you have some tea?' she said.

'I don't want any tea,' Hannah answered. 'If that's where you sleep,' she added, nodding towards the farther room, 'you had better go and pack up your things at once. We shall have time to catch the 6.50; I don't mind taking a cab to the station.'

'I am not coming,' Margaret answered firmly.

'And what do you think you are going to do in London?' asked Hannah, beginning to lose her temper again. 'And what sort of house is this you're in, I should like to know, with an actress lodging downstairs? I've found that out already.'

'I hope I shall be an actress, too, soon.'

'You!' Hannah almost screamed. 'You that have no religion now want to be an actress—where do you think it will all end?'

'I am not going to discuss it with you,' Margaret answered loftily; 'it was very kind of you to come, but if you won't have any tea you had better go home again. I have written to my father, and I know that my mother will trust me. I am glad that I have not got any of the religion that makes you so narrow and hard. You have made me afraid of even thinking about that; and I'm going to be an actress. But I won't do anything wrong——'

'We are all weak,' Hannah began in consternation.

'I will be as strong as I can,' Margaret cried passionately. 'Go back, Hannah, and think things over. If there can be peace at home, and Mr. Garratt is not a bone of contention between us—I don't want him, you understand—presently I will come home again.'

'You return with me to-night,' Hannah insisted, 'or you shall not enter the house again.'

'I shall not return with you to-night,' Margaret answered doggedly.

'It's what I always knew would come of it. Understand now, Margaret, once for all, that unless you go back with me I'll have the door closed against you. 'I'd turn the key and close the bolts myself, though it were the coldest night in winter.'

'But remember I have a right to come,' Margaret said, blazing a little. 'You have no right to lock me out of my mother's house.'

'Right or no right, unless you come now you shall not enter till I'm forced to let you in. I've had unbelievers long enough about the place, but when it comes to actresses too, it's time I made a stand, and I'll make it. Now, are you coming?' she asked, in a threatening voice.

'No, I'm not.'

'Very well, then, the rest is on your own head.' Hannah opened the door and hesitated. 'I'm

sure I 've had enough of you,' she said. And as she went down the stairs Margaret flew after her.

'Oh, tell my mother that I love her,' she cried entreatingly.

'Pretty love!' said Hannah scornfully, as she stalked along the little hall and out into the street.

'Hannah——' Margaret began.

'Pretty love!' repeated Hannah from the pavement, 'I 've no patience with it,' and with her head in the air she marched up the street.

Margaret went back to the drawing-room and threw herself down on her knees beside the sofa. 'Oh, what can I do!' she cried. 'If I had only some one to help me! This is what it means—this is why they want it so, and why they take it, whether they believe or not—just for the comfort,' she went on incoherently to herself. 'Human beings are not strong enough to manage their lives alone—it is why all the mistakes are made. But, mother—I must write to her at once. Oh, my dear, dear mother.' She went to the writing-table on one side of the room. There was a worn-out old blotting-book, and in it a sheet of crumpled note-paper. She smoothed it, and with a wretched spiky pen poured out her heart in a letter, and felt better for it. Her mother would understand, her mother always did, and would trust her and wait. How she wished already that she had never left the farm, that she had borne Hannah's scoldings, borne anything

rather than deserted the dear home of all her life. She only realised, too, now that she was away from her, that her mother was growing old—how foolish it seemed to miss any time at all with her. But Hannah was terrible. Day after day, week after week since her father went, she had tormented Margaret, and save by fits and starts her mother had been too well lost in her own dreams even to notice it, except, of course, when there had been scenes, and these were as trying to Mrs. Vincent as to Margaret. After all, she had done a wise thing, especially since Mr. Garratt had written, and her father was not coming home just yet. 'It 's only the beginning that is so difficult,' she said to herself; 'presently it will be better.' She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. The Lakemans must be safe in Scotland by this time: Hannah was on her way back to Chidhurst. She wondered whether Tom Carringford was in London, and if he had thought of her yesterday—only yesterday, but it seemed long ago already—when he went to the house on the hill to dine, if he had looked across, even once, at Woodside Farm.

CHAPTER XXVI

It was the strangest thing to wake in the morning and realise that she was alone, living on her own responsibility, in London; the strangest thing to walk into her sitting-room and see breakfast laid for one.

'Oh, I can't live by myself,' she cried; 'it's such a mad thing to do.' But hundreds did it, why not she? Courage! She had started on her way through the world, and it would be better to begin at once arranging the work she meant to do. She knew the name of Mr. Farley's theatre; she wondered if it would be better to go and see him rather than to write. It was so difficult to explain things in a letter, and she had learnt already that to get to any place she didn't know in London it was only necessary to take a cab, and to pay the man at the end of the journey.

She was too impatient to wait long, and it was just eleven o'clock when she inquired for Mr. Farley at the box-office of the theatre, and was directed to go to the stage door. The stage door was down a court, ugly and narrow; the door-keeper in a little office on the right inquired her

business. Her name was written on a slip of paper and sent up to Mr. Farley, and after she had waited some minutes in an ill-kept passage a boy came and asked her to follow him. Across the stage—it looked like a staring desert—and past the scenery leaning against the walls—lath and canvas and cardboard and crude colours—that suggested the realities of the life she was seeking, up a little staircase and into a comfortable well-furnished room, hung with signed portraits of celebrities. Mr. Farley came forward to meet her; he shook hands and looked at her approvingly, for he had already divined the object of her visit.

'And what did Miss—Miss Hannah, was it?—say to this scheme?' he asked with a smile, when she had stated her ambitions.

'She doesn't approve of it; but my mother will trust me.'

'And does any one know that you are in London?' his thoughts were running to Tom Carringford.

'No one. I wrote to Miss Hunstan, but she is at Bayreuth. I don't want any one else to know, Mr. Farley—my life is my own to live,' she added quickly; 'and I want to begin at once. Can you let me "walk on" as Miss Hunstan did once?'

The girl had some stuff in her, he thought. 'Certainly you shall walk on if you like, Miss

Vincent; we can easily make room for one or two more,' he answered. 'But understand, it means hard work; you will have to come to rehearsal, and perhaps to wait about for hours; and when we begin to play you must come down every night, of course; and nothing must make you late or careless—ill or well, you must be here. No excuses allowed, your work must come before everything else; and to begin with you will get a guinea a week. Young ladies are apt to think they have only to run on the stage to become actresses, but you will find that nothing is done without hard work and patient waiting, unless you are a genius: if you are, we shall discover it. We begin rehearsing at 11.30 to-day, you can wait if you like.' When he dismissed her, she had realised that he was a different person altogether in the theatre from the Dawson Farley of Mrs. Lakeman's drawing-room, or the garden at Woodside Farm. Nevertheless he had been interested by her visit. It was very odd, he thought, this girl coming from the atmosphere in which he had seen her last week to lonely lodgings in Westminster. Very odd altogether. Lucky for her that she had found her way into Mrs. Gilman's: a respectable house, and a nice woman. He had half a mind to telegraph the whole thing to Mrs. Lakeman, and suggest that she should invite Margaret to Scotland,—it would be far better for her than staying by herself in London;

but, after all, it was no affair of his, and he disliked mixing up business and private matters. Still, when he wrote to Pitlochry, he made up his mind he would tell Mrs. Lakeman about Margaret; she was a clever practical woman, and would know if anything ought to be done for the girl.

Meanwhile, Margaret had been given over to the stage manager, and waited eagerly for the rehearsal to begin. It was uglier than she had expected. The gaping empty theatre, covered with holland sheets; the dusty stage, with its white-washed walls, the lumbering scenery packed together; the everyday clothes of the actors and actresses, made it all a vastly different matter from seeing a play at night from the stalls with her father; but it was absurd of her, she thought, not to have remembered that it would be so; 'it is like being at the back of the world,' she said to herself. The company was a good-sized one, and Margaret, shy and awkward, stood apart looking at it. Some of its members were ladies and gentlemen; they glanced at her, curiously wondering who she was, but only for a moment; they were intent on their own life battle. Some were not ladies and gentlemen, but tawdry make-believes, or shabby and anxious-looking. One or two of them looked as if they would have spoken to her, but she gave them no encouragement. When Dawson Farley came on he was busy, and full of the responsibility of a great speculation; he had forgotten all about her.

Even in that first day she realised that she was a little unit of no account in an important whole. True, when she had to go across the stage at the end of the first act, he turned his head for a moment. She walked well, he thought; if he heard that she was intelligent, he might some day give her a small part. She was beautiful, he realised that: ten years ago the story of Louise Hunstan might have been repeated (on his side), but now he was wiser. Then it struck him, as he waited in the wings, that her mother had looked ill the other day, like a woman who was not going to live long, and that if she died Mrs. Lakeman might want to marry her old lover, Gerald Vincent. Perhaps if he wanted to marry Mrs. Lakeman himself it would be wise if he tried to hurry things up a little. He was a man who made up his mind quickly, and he determined that he would propose to Mrs. Lakeman within the next fortnight.

Margaret had discovered that it was only a little way from the theatre to Great College Street, and she walked back from the rehearsal. After the stuffiness and dimness of the theatre she was glad to be in the open air again, and all manner of new experiences suggested themselves. She looked at the people she passed in the narrow street near the stage door; they seemed to have suffered so much, to have hoped for so much, and each to have a strange little history of some sort.

A dim perception of the temptations of life dawned upon her, the expression of a woman's face, or a man's casual speech, brought home to her a sense of some things at which Hannah had railed. Hannah had only known of them by instinct, or she had railed at them, parrot-like, because she had heard others do so; but under it all lay a foundation, though she had never dug to it. And thus gradually Margaret realised that of all people and of all things there was a justification, from a given point of view, and that even if it made no difference to a condemnation, it should never be forgotten.

The morning, the third day of Margaret's stay in London, brought her a letter from her mother, a simple trusting letter, with not a shadow of reproach in it. 'I wish you hadn't left us so, Margey, dear,' she said, 'for it has made Hannah very angry, and I don't think it would be any good your coming back just yet, but if you want anything write to me. It is a good thing that you are living in a house with such a nice woman. Perhaps you could write to Sir George Stringer, for he knew your father when he was young, and would help you to do what is best. Hannah is packing your trunk to send up, but I am afraid to say anything to her. When she goes to Petersfield at the end of the week I 'll send you some eggs and butter and flowers, but I don't like to say anything about it now, for it 's no good

making her cross. I wrote to Mr. Garratt, and told him you had gone to London, and I sent him back the letter as you asked me. I'm not very well, but you must not be anxious. I think it's the trial of Hannah's temper when you were here. Perhaps, after all, it's as well that you are away for a bit. She may have got over it a little in a month or two. I think I ought to tell you that she is very angry indeed about your being an actress. She says old Mr. and Mrs. Barton of Petersfield will say I am doing very wrong in giving my consent, but I have never believed in the world being as bad as they do, or could see why the theatre should be wicked. Your father said once that everything was just what we made it, and it could always be made good or bad, and I want you to remember that about your life. It is what I have always felt about your father, and that God, who knows him, will be satisfied, no matter what people say.'

Margaret kissed the grey paper that her mother's dear hands had touched and gave a long sigh of thankfulness. 'She isn't angry,' she said to herself; 'and she understands. My mother always did, bless her.' She rose and walked up and down the little drawing-room. She had not known till now how much she had longed for a letter, for some sign that she had not done a wicked or foolish thing when she fled from home. 'Now I feel as if I can go on,'

she said, 'and who knows but that some day I shall be a great actress like Miss Hunstan—she has my letter this morning, I wonder what she 'll say when she writes to me.' The little clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. As if in answer to it there came a double knock to the street door, the sound of a voice and some hurried steps, and the next moment Tom Carringford walked in. Margaret started to her feet with a cry of surprise :

'Oh,' she said, 'how did you know I was here?'

'Miss Hunstan wired—had it ten minutes ago —so got into a hansom and came at once. And now what is the matter?' he asked, just as if he had a right to do so. He sat down on the easy-chair facing her, his face beaming with happiness, even though Mr. Garratt rankled in his memory. 'Why are you in London? You said something about coming, in the wood that day, but I didn't think you meant it.'

'I am here just as Miss Hunstan is. I have taken these rooms, and want to be an actress as she was.'

'What for?'—his eyes were full of astonishment—'and what does your mother say to it?'

'She understands. She knows that I can't go back till my father returns.'

'And what about Mr. Garratt?' his tone was brisk and gay, but he waited eagerly for her answer.

'Oh!' and she grew crimson, 'I did so want to tell you about Mr. Garratt, but I didn't feel that I could unless you asked me. He came to see Hannah, we thought he liked her——'

'I don't believe that,' he laughed. 'I saw Hannah, you know.'

'And then he thought—that—he liked me—and he said—well, he said things—you know,' she added rather lamely.

Tom nodded to give her courage. 'I know—well?'

'And he went up to the wood when I was there, and Lena Lakeman came up and found him, and—and, oh, I hated Mr. Garratt,' and she burst into tears. 'I can't tell you how much I detest him, and yet, you know, he was very straightforward in a way, and he was not afraid of saying what he thought, and of course he couldn't help being vulgar——'

'And what about Hannah?'

'It was impossible to stay there with Hannah—and Mr. Garratt—and—all the scenes.' She was confused and incoherent, but Tom made out the story in his own mind.

'And then?'

'And then I slipped out in the darkness on Sunday night and came up here. I thought perhaps Miss Hunstan would help me.'

His face beamed with happiness. 'Of course I knew there couldn't really be anything between

you and Mr. Garratt, only it looked very odd, didn't it? And then Lena told me about Sunday —about his being up there, you know, and how she found you——'

'Oh, don't,' Margaret cried passionately. 'It was mean of her to tell you, for she heard everything I said to him——'

'Well, never mind,' he answered, in a consoling voice, 'we've done with him, haven't we? But you know, Margaret,' he added, falling into the familiar address without being aware of it, 'you can't go on staying in rooms in London by yourself; and as for going on the stage, why, it's all nonsense. I am very impertinent to say it, of course, but you see our fathers knew each other all their lives, so you must look upon me as an old friend. It's a great bore the Lakemans being in Scotland, you might have stayed with them——'

'No, I couldn't.'

'Why not? Mrs. Lakeman is a good sort. Lena is a bit of a bore, of course,' a remark which, for some unknown reason, brought exultation to Margaret's heart. 'As for being an actress, why that's all nonsense—don't look so offended.' His voice would have been tender if he had not checked it. 'People often come to grief in London—things are too much for them.'

'I am not offended,' she answered; 'but if

things are too much for me I suppose I must bear it as others have done; after all, the soldier who falls on the battlefield is more to be envied than if he dies in his native village.'

'I should think you have done a good deal of reading; that sounds like it, you know,' at which they laughed like the boy and girl they were. 'I wish you'd go back,' he half entreated.

'But I won't,' she said obstinately.

'Then let me wire to the Lakemans and ask if they can have you?'

'I wouldn't for the world.'

'Obstinate thing! And you mean to say that you are bent on this stage business?'

'Yes; I'm bent on it;' then she told him of her visit to Mr. Farley in the morning and of the two rehearsals. He got up and walked about. He was worried of course, he felt that he ought to be worried—at the daughter of Gerald Vincent doing this sort of thing—but he was so happy at hearing that there was nothing between her and Mr. Garratt that he found it difficult to be serious. 'I wish I could make you see,' he said, 'that you are only taking the bread out of other people's mouths. When I get into the House I shall make bread-snatching a penal offence and send you to prison.'

'Bread-snatching! What do you mean?'

'Why, you see lots of women have to work for food and clothes and a roof. Some try to

act, some to dress-make, or write novels, or teach infants—that 's all right of course. They 've got to do it to get through the world. If you have a great deal of talent for acting, even though you are not obliged to do it, it is all right to go on the stage, and, of course, if you have genius you have no business to keep it from the world. But there are a whole heap of women who want to do things for the sake of getting a little more money than they really want, or because they like being talked about, or for some other reason that doesn't hold water, and they do it under easy conditions, and snatch the chances from the women who do it for their bread and butter. I think they are an immoral lot myself.'

'But, Mr. Carringford——'

'You don't want money, do you?'

'I 've a hundred pounds in my pocket——'

'Splendid! I 've only got two pounds ten in mine. But what have you got a year?'

'Father has two hundred. I have it while he is away.'

'But when your father returns he 'll be rich. His brother has made a pile out there—heard so the other day—and he hasn't any children. Do go back to the farm, there 's a dear girl.'

'But I can't,' said Margaret, carefully concealing the pleasure she felt at being called a dear girl. 'Hannah wouldn't even let me in now. Besides, I may be very stupid or I may be a

genius; I want to find out, and I shall be quite safe here.'

'Oh, yes, you'll be quite safe here. Mrs. Gilman is a nice woman. She's a great friend of mine. I shall go and talk to her in a moment. My people used to know her—believe it was my mother who sent Miss Hunstan here.'

'I never thought about the people who have to earn money for bread and butter,' she said; 'I wouldn't snatch it from them for the world.'

'Of course you wouldn't,' he answered with extreme approval.

'And if I find I am very stupid I will give it up.'

'That's right.'

'But I should like to try first. And I couldn't go home, indeed—not yet, that is——'

'Well, if you are sure of that,' he said after a moment's consideration, and evidently delighted with the brilliancy of the idea he was propounding. 'When you have done your rehearsal to-day we might have a spree—drive about or something. Mr. Vincent let us do it before, so he would not mind our doing it again.'

'Of course not,' she answered joyfully.

'Shall I call for you at the theatre?'

'I don't know what time the rehearsal will be over.'

'Then suppose I come here at four and we drive to Richmond, walk about in the park, dine

early, and get back here by nine? That'll be all right, you know, or we'll take a steamer on the river Thames, as the guide-books say, and go to Greenwich. Meanwhile, does George Stringer know that you are in London?'

'No; but I am going to write to him. I didn't think of it till mother wrote.'

'I shall tell the Lakemans you are here, of course.'

'Yes,' she answered very doubtfully.

'I don't believe you care about them?'

'I've only seen Mrs. Lakeman twice.' She stopped a moment. 'Mr. Carringford—' she began.

'Why do you call me that? It sounds so absurd.'

'Does it,' she said, and the colour came to her face. 'I was going to ask—are you engaged to Lena Lakeman?' She almost laughed, for now, somehow, the question seemed absurd.

'No. Are you engaged to Mr. Garratt?'

'Why, of course not!'

'That's all right then. Didn't you say your rehearsal was at 11.30? I might drive you down. Only twenty minutes—you must be punctual, you know, if you are going on the stage.'

'Of course,' she laughed. 'I'll go and get ready at once.'

CHAPTER XXVII

TEN days had passed. It was like a dream to Margaret to be in London alone, her mother and Hannah at Woodside Farm, and her father on the other side of the world. But she was beginning to be uneasy at what she had done—at taking this step out into the world without her father's knowledge. Perhaps he would be angry with her, or would say, as Tom did, that she had joined the great army of bread-snatchers, the women who were not obliged to work for their living, who had no genius to justify them, no particular talent even, and yet from sheer restlessness and inability to settle down in their homes and quietly fulfil the duties there, had come out into the open and meddled with work that others might do better, and for a wage that meant to those others, not added luxuries and frivolities, but the means of living. She wished a hundred times that Mr. Garratt had never come near Woodside Farm, that she had never left it, that she were sitting on the arm of her mother's chair in the living-room once more, looking out at the garden and the beech wood beyond; but some-

thing in her heart told her that that happiness was for ever at an end. No one approved of the step she had taken except her mother, who had seen the impossibility of her remaining at home. Hannah had shut the door on her, and Tom had shaken his head.

Sir George Stringer had appeared as promptly as possible after getting her note; but since he was away when it arrived, that was not till a couple of days after she had written it.

He was emphatic enough.

'My dear Margaret—I think I may call you that as I have known your father all my life—this is sheer madness, and what 's more, it 's wrong,' he said. 'You are not old enough to choose your life yet. Take my advice and go back as fast as you can.'

'I can't,' she answered dismayed.

'Of course it was unpleasant to have the attentions of the young man I saw.' Tom Carringford had told him the correct version of that story. 'But you have surely wit enough to let him see that they are distasteful to you?'

'I did—I did.'

'If my sister were not such an invalid I should insist on your going to her at Folkestone.'

'Oh, but I want to stay in London,' she said firmly, and told him of her engagement at Farley's Theatre. He was furious, and could not hide it.

'The fact of the matter is, you like this

rehearsing business. It's sheer madness!' he repeated. 'And I expect you like seeing Master Tom, and that is madness, too. He and Lena Lakeman have always been fond of each other, and you will only upset their relations with your pretty eyes, or ruin your own peace of mind.' A more untactful gentleman than Sir George in a matter of this kind it would have been difficult to find. 'I suppose you know that he and Lena Lakeman are fond of each other? She's fond of him, at any rate,—or else it would have been the best thing in the world—'pon my soul, I wish some one would marry you.'

'But I don't want to be married.' Margaret was indignant.

'Yes, you do,' he said, recovering his good humour. 'All girls want to be married—nice girls, that is. Quite right, too. For my part, I think women ought to be married as soon as possible; if they are single at eight-and-twenty they ought to be shunted off to the colonies. They are only in the way here; but they might be of some use out there.'

'Do you think I ought to go after my father to Australia?' she asked demurely, with a twinkle in her eye.

'No, my dear, I don't think that.' He was quite pacified by this time. 'But I think you ought to go home, and if you can't do that you had better come and stay with me. I'm going

to Chidhurst myself at the end of the week—day after to-morrow—if I can get off, unless I go to Dieppe for a few days first; better come with me —perhaps that won't do either. Really, a young lady is a very difficult thing to manage.'

'I am quite safe here, dear Sir George,' she said. 'When you are at Chidhurst I wish you would go and see my mother.'

'I 'll go and see your mother, and tell her she ought to be ashamed of herself to let you stay here.' His voice had become abstracted, he was evidently considering something in his own mind. He got up from his seat and walked up and down once or twice. He turned and looked at Margaret half wonderingly, then at himself in the glass, and at her again. 'My dear Margaret,' he said, 'I dare say you will think I am as mad as a hatter, but do you think you could marry me?'

She nearly bounded off her chair.

'Marry you?'

'Well, really, it seems to me that it 's the best way out of it. I 'm five years older than your father, but there 's life in the old dog yet. You are a beautiful girl—I thought so the first moment I saw you, and I could be thoroughly fond of you. In fact, I believe I am already. I have no one belonging to me in the world except my sister; and I 'm afraid she won't be here long, poor thing; no entanglements of any sort—never had. Quite well off, can give you as many pretty things

as you like, and I'll take care of you, and not be grumpy. Do you think you could?'

'Oh, no, I couldn't, indeed!' She put both her hands into his with frank astonishment. 'You are very kind, but you are——'

'Old, eh?'

'Oh, no, no!' she said. 'But I'm a girl—and I couldn't——'

'Why not? It seems to me it might work well enough, my dear.'

'I couldn't—I couldn't!' she repeated.

'Is it Master Tom?' he asked, like an idiot.

'No.'

'Because he ought to marry Lena Lakeman and no one else.'

'And I can't marry any one,' she answered.

He stood still for a moment, holding her hands and looking at her gravely. When he spoke there was real feeling in his voice, and Margaret knew it.

'Think it over,' he said. 'I would be very kind to you, dear; you should do pretty much as you liked; and there's no fool like an old fool, remember. I didn't mean to say this when I came in—hadn't an idea of it; but I think it's a way out, and a good one. I am very lonely sometimes; I should be another man if I had a girl to look after, and an old fogey would perhaps delight in your girlhood more than a boy would

know how to do. I think I 'll run over to Dieppe for a few days instead of going to Chidhurst, and come and hear what you have to say to me when I return.'

'It will be just the same,' she answered.

'You don't know;' he shook her hands and hesitated, then stooped and kissed her forehead. 'I have known your father all my life and would do well by you,' he said.

He walked away from Great College Street muttering to himself. 'Upon my life, I believe she's in love with Tom. I don't know what Hilda Lakeman will say to it all. I wonder if Hilda was lying? She generally is. Pretty fool I 've made of myself, for I don't believe the girl will ever look at me. I wish she would. I suppose now she 'll go and tell Tom; that 'll be the next thing, and he will laugh at me. Best thing I can do is to tell him myself, and have done with it. Here! Hi!' and he stopped a hansom—'Stratton Street.' He got in rather slowly. 'I 'm blest if there isn't a twinge of gout in my foot now—just to remind me that I 'm an ass, I suppose.' He met Tom coming out of his house.

'Just wanted to see you for a minute—can you come back?'

'All right,' said Tom; 'come along,' and led the way into the house.

'Look here, my dear boy, I came to speak to

you about Margaret Vincent. You know she wrote to me?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, it seems to me sheer idiotcy—worse, almost a crime—that Vincent's girl should be here alone in lodgings and apparently stark staring mad about the stage.'

'I have told her so—but I am looking after her.'

'Which only makes matters worse; besides, the Lakemans won't like it.'

'It doesn't matter to them.'

'Well, but I suppose you are going to marry Lena some day?'

'Never dreamt of it.'

'Never dreamt of it!' Sir George repeated, looking at him incredulously; and then with a glimmering of common-sense it occurred to him not to repeat Mrs. Lakeman's confidence. 'But you are going to them in Scotland?'

'I ought. Lena's very ill, I fear, and Mrs. Lakeman writes to me every day asking me to go and cheer them up.'

'Humph!' said Sir George to himself, 'trust Hilda for knowing what she's about. Well,' he added aloud, 'I didn't think it was a good thing for that girl to be here in London alone, and I knew that you were due in Scotland, and belonged to the Lakemans——'

'To the Lakemans!' Tom repeated, rather bewildered.

'So when I went round to see her just now, I thought the only way out of the difficulty was—was—well, the fact is, I asked her to marry me.'

'Lor'!' Tom said, and opened his blue eyes very wide. 'What did she say?'

'Wouldn't look at me. Now, of course, I feel that I have made a fool of myself, and, upon my life, I haven't the courage to go near her again for a bit. Think I'll run over to Dieppe and shake it off. What I want to say is——' he stopped, for it suddenly occurred to him that he might be mismanaging things all round. 'Something must be done about the girl, you know,' he said.

Tom held out his hand.

'It's all right,' he answered; 'don't worry about her; 'I'll see that she doesn't come to grief.'

Sir George looked back at him and understood. 'I know you are a good boy,' he said, and grasped Tom's hand, 'and will do the best you can. Don't think me an old fool. I did it as much for her sake as my own. I shall come back next week and look her up again before I go to Chidhurst.' And he took his departure.

But Tom stayed behind, and thought things over more seriously than was his wont. 'I wish Mrs. Lakeman would be quiet, or Lena would get better. I ought to go, I suppose, but I can't till this matter is settled.' Then he went down to the theatre and fetched Margaret from her

rehearsal; it was nearly three o'clock before it was over.

'I have had two telegrams,' she told him. 'Mr. Farley, I suppose, told Mrs. Lakeman that I was in London, and she has sent me this.'

He took it from her and read—

'*Come and stay with us here. Pitlochry—train leaves Euston to-morrow night at eight; meet you at Perth; ask Farley to see you off.*'

Mrs. Lakeman was always practical and full of detail. The other telegram was from Lena, and ran—

'*Do come, little Margaret, we want you.*'

'What are you going to do?' asked Tom.

'I telegraphed back—"Thank you very much, but quite impossible!"'

'Good, good!' but his voice was a little absent. He was becoming serious.

Miss Hunstan had written, but from a cheering point of view; for she, too, had once set out on her way through the world alone.

'I wish I'd been there to receive you,' she said in her letter; 'but when I come back you will be in your rooms above and I in mine beneath. We must be friends and help each other.'

'It's just like her,' said Tom; 'but she's a dear, you know. By the way, I saw Stringer just now, he told me he had been to see you.'

'Yes,' Margaret answered uneasily. They were

in a hansom by this time, driving to Great College Street.'

'What did he say?' asked Tom maliciously.

'He was very kind,' she answered; the colour came to her face; 'he said I oughtn't to be in London alone.'

'Quite right!' and Tom thought that she was a nice girl not to betray her elderly lover; a proposal was a thing that every woman should regard as confidential—unless she accepted it, of course.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANOTHER week and the whole world had changed. Margaret forgot Hannah and Woodside Farm; sometimes she even forgot her longing to see her mother's face again. She was blind to the people in the street, to everything about her; her ambition to be an actress was lulled into pleasant abeyance. A great happiness dawned in her heart—she did not try to put a name to it, she did not even know it to be there; but the whole world seemed to be full of it, and in the world there was just one person—Tom Carringford. He came to her every day; in some sort of fashion he constituted himself her guardian, though they preserved the happy playfellow terms of boy and girl. They made all manner of innocent expeditions together—to Battersea Park, where they rowed about in a boat on the lake, and then drove back to dine in Margaret's little sitting-room (a simple dinner that Mrs. Gilman arranged), to Richmond, where they dined by an open window, and drove back again before it was dark, for Tom, with all his seeming carelessness, had an occasional

uneasy sense of conventionality, though he said nothing about it to Margaret. 'I don't want to put her up to things, she is much too nice as she is,' he thought. They went to Chiswick and Kew; they talked about Pope at Twickenham, and walked along the tow-path, to Bushey and Hampton Court, and had tea—by an open window again—at the old-fashioned inn, and returned in the cool of the evening. One day they went to the Zoo, where they laughed at the animals and fed the monkeys, and again had tea, and ate so many cucumber sandwiches that they were ashamed to count them—for it was a proof of their youth and unsophistication that they generally made eating a part of their entertainment when they went out together.

They only lived for each other, yet neither stopped to realise it, till at the end of ten days Tom was roused to a sense of what was happening by a letter from Mrs. Lakeman. Lena was very ill indeed, she said, and had been waiting day after day for Tom; why hadn't he come? She had heard from Sir George Stringer that the Vincent girl was in town—was Tom aware of it? Probably she was too much taken up with the young grocer from Guildford to have made a sign to him? This was an unwise remark for so tactful a woman as Mrs. Lakeman; it made Tom snort indignantly, and brought home to him the difficulties of Margaret's position. Just

as he was starting to meet her after the rehearsal that afternoon a telegram arrived—

'*Come immediately, Lena dangerously ill.*'

'Whew!' he said, 'I must go by the eight o'clock mail this evening.' He turned back to tell his man to pack a bag, take tickets, and meet him at Euston, then drove to the theatre to find that the rehearsal was over and every one had gone. He went on as fast as possible to Great College Street.

Margaret tried not to show her consternation, but her face betrayed her.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. Sir George told me you belonged to Lena—but that isn't true, is it?'

'Of course not,' he answered, staring at her, and wondering that she could repeat anything so absurd; 'but they have been very kind to me, and I ought to go. Besides,' he added, for Tom was always loyal, 'I like them both.' He stopped a minute, and then he said suddenly, 'I wish you would give up the theatre.'

'I can't,' but her tone was not so positive as it had been.

'You know,' he began slowly, 'I have been thinking a great deal about things lately, and wondering——'

'Yes.'

'I'm not sure that I want to tell you—I am rather afraid; suppose we go and drive about a bit, and perhaps you shall know when we come in.'

'It's such a rum thing,' he thought, when she had gone to get her hat, 'that she should be living here alone; I feel as if I simply can't go away and leave her. And if I say anything and she doesn't care for me it will be all up, and I shall find myself where poor old Stringer is. I wonder if he has got over it a bit, and will come and look after her while I am away in Scotland.' Sir George had returned from Dieppe the day before, but he had been shy of going near Margaret. Tom had seen him in the street and thought it wise not to recognise him.

Margaret came in ready to go out. She wore a white dress and a black hat that drooped a little on one side with the heaviness of its trimming. There was a thin gold chain round her neck—he knew that the locket attached to it contained her mother's hair. He looked at her for a moment, at her blue eyes and proud lips, and her slim tall figure, and his heart gave a great thud.

'I can't bear to think I am going to-night,' he said.

'And I can't,' she answered, almost without being aware of it.

Then it seemed as if fate took hold of him and forced him to speak. 'Margaret,' he said, and his tone brought the colour to her face, 'this can't go on, it will have to come to an end somehow. You know we like being together—it's glorious, isn't it? But—I've grown fond of you, I can't

help it; I wonder if you like me, if you care for me—it would make everything so easy. I love you—more than anything in the world, and you always seem happy enough with me. Do you think you could stand it always? Cut the theatre, you know, and all that at once, and marry me?'

'Oh, Tom! I didn't think you were going to say that—' she said. She sat down on the little sofa and looked up at him reproachfully, 'it's so awkward,' she added with a funny little smile, 'I don't know what to do—' and quite suddenly she hid her face in the cushion and burst into tears.

'My darling!' he said. 'My little darling, what is the matter?' He knelt down by her and pulled her hat-pin out. 'Ghastly long thing,' he said to himself, 'enough to kill one.' He stuck it into the back of the sofa, took off her hat and flung it—her best hat—to the other end of the room, and gathered her into his arms and kissed her. 'Why, what are you crying for?' he asked. 'Have I frightened you—have I?' But his tone was triumphant, for since she made no resistance he thought it must be all right, so he wisely went on kissing her, for there is nothing like making the most of an opportunity—especially a first one.

'Oh, you mustn't—you mustn't!' she said, afraid lest he should see her eyes.

'You know this is what it means,' he said, holding her closer. 'Why, we liked each other from the first, didn't we? Think what a spree

we had that morning when we came here with the flowers.'

'I know—but I can't be married.'

'Why not?'

'It seems so strange.'

'You'll get used to it.'

'And father is away.'

'All the more reason.'

'But we can't, till he comes back.'

'Yes we can; there are plenty of churches about. By the way, you don't go to one, do you? You know I never thought much of those unbeliefs of yours.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, struggling out of his arms and trying to be collected and sensible, but finding it rather difficult.

'Well, you know, I think people often believe in things and don't know it, or don't believe in anything and yet imagine they do.'

'Does it matter?' she asked feebly.

'Not a bit, so long as they are the right sort, you know. If all roads lead to Heaven, it doesn't matter what language one talks on the journey, or whether one arrives in a monk's cowl or with a feather in one's cap.'

'Oh! you are just talking nonsense,' she said, looking at his face and thinking what a dear one it was.

'Of course I am; we are much too happy to talk anything else. By the way, I ought to beg

your pardon for thinking you cared about Garratt.'

'I think you ought,' she laughed.

'Though I don't know whether I'm any better than he is,' he added modestly. 'I say, you do care for me, don't you? You know, you haven't said it yet.'

'I do care for you,' she said—with all her heart.

'When did you begin?'

'I don't know; I don't know a bit, Tom dear, but what I have felt is that——'

'Yes, go on.'

'That it was the greatest happiness in the world to be with you. Why, I have simply laughed for joy at the sound of your step, and when you are away I think of you all the time and every minute, and I don't even care for the theatre any more, or for being an actress.'

'Good, good! Go on.'

'And I am so happy now,' she continued; 'so stifled and overcome with happiness that I feel as if I should die of it.'

'Oh, well, don't do that—it's quite unnecessary, and it would be rather a bore, you know. When shall we be married?'

'Oh, but——'

'There's nothing to wait for. I have plenty of money, and the house in Stratton Street is literally gaping for you to go and live in it. It seems to

me that the only thing to be done is to get a ring and a license.'

'But we can't be married till father knows, we can't, indeed.'

'All right, dear, we'll send him a cable. We might send your mother a telegram at the same time—what do you think?'

Margaret considered for a moment. 'How soon do you think I could give up the theatre?' she asked.

'Why, this very minute, of course. I'll write to Farley before I start, and so shall you, and tell him all about it.'

'But can he get any one in my place immediately?'

'Of course; probably a whole crowd waiting round the stage door ready to jump into it. There are too many people in the world who want to work,—and too many who must work,' he added. 'But what about your mother?'

'Why, if I really needn't go to the theatre any more, we won't telegraph. I should so love to tell her. She liked you, you know, she liked you so very much; and I will go to her to-morrow and tell her.'

'Good, good!' he cried again. 'But what about Hannah, will she let you in?'

'I think she will, when she knows I am not going to be an actress—and about this.'

'She might think you are doing worse?'

'No, she won't.'

'Well, that's settled; now we'll send the cable. Let's write it here, then we need only copy it out in the office. Where is your paper?' he asked impulsively, going to the writing-table. 'Now then. "*Carringford to Vincent. May I marry Margaret—Tom.*" Will that do?' he asked.

'Splendid,' she laughed.

'I think you ought to send one on your own account.'

'Yes, yes,' she cried joyfully; so a second cable was written.—'*Vincent to Vincent. Please say yes —Margaret.*' 'Will that do?' she echoed.

'Splendid!' he echoed back. 'What a glorious girl you are, Margey—your mother called you Margey, you know. I think I should like to send one to her, not telling her, but as a sort of preface—enough to make her guess something.' He considered for a moment and then he wrote—'*Tom Carringford sends his love to you.*' 'It shall go as if it were a little message flying out of space.' He stopped and considered again. 'I think I should like the Lakemans to know before I get there. I have telegraphed already saying that I start to-night; but if Lena's very ill, it looks rather cruel to burst upon them with this sort of thing.'

'Must they be told at once?' Margaret asked.

'Well, they have always been so kind to me.'

Almost mechanically he took up his pen and wrote—'*Margaret and I want you to know that we are engaged, but of course I start alone to-night. Kind love—Tom.*' Margaret kept her lips closed, for she thought of the Lakemans with a dislike that was almost beyond her control, but she felt that her father's memories, no less than the fact that the Lakemans were Tom's friends demanded her silence. 'Now then,' he said, 'that's all over. Where's your hat?'

'Over there, on the floor,' she answered demurely, 'upside down—my best hat.'

'Never mind, I 'll give you a dozen new ones. Let 's send off these things and go for an hour's drive in the fastest hansom we can find—just to calm us down a little. Then suppose we come back and dine quietly here at seven. Mrs. Gilman will manage it—I shall have to fly at half-past.' Tom had reflected quickly that Great College Street was the best shelter for a quiet *tête-à-tête*. 'Come along.' He took her hand and ran with her down the narrow staircase. 'I don't believe you know how fond I am of you, but you 'll find out in time,' he said, stopping half way.

'I do know,' she answered; 'and I love you—dreadfully.'

He looked at her and kissed her, then a happy thought struck him.

'Mrs. Gilman!' he called boisterously, for there were no other people in the house, 'I want to tell

you,' he said when that good woman appeared, 'that Miss Vincent and I are engaged.'

'Oh, Mr. Carringford!'

'It 's all right,' he added, rather afraid that she was going to cry. 'We are coming back presently, and you must give us some dinner at seven sharp. I start for Scotland at eight—from Euston, so let it be quite punctual.' He looked back as they were going out of the door and spoke to Mrs. Gilman again. 'We 'll stop in Stratton Street,' he said, 'and tell my man to bring round a couple of bottles of champagne. You must keep one and drink our healths. Oh, that 's all right. I knew you would be glad.'

'Tom,' said Margaret, as they drove away; 'what do you think Mrs. Lakeman will say?'

'Why, she 'll be delighted, of course, and so will Lena. It will cheer her up.'

CHAPTER XXIX

MR. DAWSON FARLEY had a flat in Victoria Street. He came down at nine o'clock and leisurely opened his letters. The one from Margaret was on the top. Tom, who had known his private address, had advised her to send it there and not to the theatre. Mr. Farley started when he read it. 'Now this is the devil!' he said. 'I thought that girl wouldn't be in London without getting into some mischief. It's lucky I wrote and told Hilda about her; but I expect it's too late to do anything. It may make a serious difference to me, though, for I couldn't stand that wriggling snake Lena in any house in which I have to live. Why the deuce hasn't Hilda written?' he went on, as he looked through his letters; 'perhaps wants to take time or worry one a little, though I don't think she is that sort of woman.' Almost as he said the last word, the door opened and Mrs. Lakeman walked in. She wore a billycock hat and a long cloak; she looked almost rowdy.

'Dawson,' she said, with her odd crooked smile, 'I thought it better to come up and answer your

letter in person, I travelled all night and have just arrived.'

'You dear woman,' he sprang to his feet, partly in astonishment, and partly because he felt quickly that he ought to be equal to the occasion. 'I knew you would do the very best thing.'

'I 'm going to do the very worst,' she answered; 'I 'm going to refuse you.'

'Refuse me?'

'Only because I don't feel like marrying, dear friend,' and she rolled some feeling into her voice. 'Have you forgotten that I am an old frump with grey hair?' She took off the billycock hat and bent her head, just as she had done to Gerald Vincent.

'I don't care,' he said; 'I want you.' He put an arm round her shoulder in a well-considered manner.

'I am very fond of you,' she said; 'I have a great affection for you, but I 'm not going to be the laughing-stock of the town—a middle-aged frump marrying an actor a little younger than herself. Let 's go on as we are, anyhow till Lena is married.'

'Then what did you come up for?'

'It was quite time,' she answered dryly. 'I suppose you know that the Vincent girl is engaged to Tom Carringford?'

'She has just written to tell me so, and thrown up the theatre business.'

'She shan't have him, the little devil!' Mrs. Lakeman exclaimed. 'I 'll take good care of that —I have,' she added triumphantly; 'for he 's at Pitlochry by this time.'

'At Pitlochry?'

'Having breakfast with Lena. Lena, in a muslin morning gown, lying on a sofa—Tom holding her hand—the rest you can imagine.'

'This is madness! I don't understand.'

Mrs. Lakeman's blue eyes were full of wickedness. 'I knew something was wrong from his letters, so I have been careful to tell him that Lena wasn't well, and to make a few remarks about Margaret Vincent and the young grocer at Guildford, which I didn't think would altogether please him. As he didn't come and didn't write, I thought it as well yesterday morning to telegraph and let him know that she was dangerously ill.'

'Which was strictly untrue, I suppose?'

'Strictly,' she answered with much relish. 'But he answered at once that he would start at eight o'clock last night, and he 's there this morning.'

'He must have proposed to Miss Vincent yesterday afternoon. I didn't know that she had even seen Carringford till three days ago, when I came upon him at the stage door waiting for her in a hansom.'

'It 's a great pity. It shouldn't have gone so far, if I 'd known in time.'

'But, after all, why should you interfere?' he asked, thinking that if Mrs. Lakeman were not going to marry him he didn't take any particular interest in Lena's making a good marriage. 'Carringford is a good fellow, and Miss Vincent 's an uncommonly handsome girl. Why shouldn't they have each other?'

'And break Lena's heart?' she said, raising her eyes to his. 'Besides, Tom belongs to us, and no one shall take him away.'

'Still, it isn't quite fair to Miss Vincent, and I don't much care to help in the matter,' he answered quite pleasantly, but with determination; 'besides, if you are not going to marry me why should I—where do I come in?'

In a moment she saw the whole drift of his reasoning.

'I shall marry no one,' she answered, 'until Lena's future is settled.'

'And if Lena marries Carringford?'

'Then you shall have your answer. You must see that a young man like you would look rather ridiculous going about with a middle-aged wife and a grown up step-daughter.'

He saw her policy, it was odd how well they saw through each other; he recognised her adroitness and her falseness, but it made no difference in his point of view: to marry her would be a worldly-wise transaction that he did not mean to forgo if he could help it, and he wanted Lena out

of the way. After all, he thought, if Margaret didn't marry Carringford she would probably do still better—a handsome girl, well born, and probably well off when her father came back. And even if she were in love now, what did it matter? She would be all the better for a disappointment, perhaps: a woman who had not been made to suffer generally became a trifle heartless. Besides, what was the girl to him?

'Where is Margaret Vincent staying?' asked Mrs. Lakeman. 'When I invited her to Scotland I telegraphed to the theatre, not knowing her private address, and she telegraphed back without giving it, which I thought rather impertinent. And Tom has only thought proper to send a telegram every other day lately.'

'He has been too much occupied with other things,' Farley said with a little smile.

'Where is she staying?'

'In Louise Hunstan's house in Great College Street. Louise is at Bayreuth.'

'That's a good thing. I'm going'—and the tone of her voice showed that she meant to be victorious. 'You may give me a kiss'—and she put up her face—'a matter-of-fact salute on my cheek would be highly appropriate to the situation.'

'Stay a moment—when are you going back?' he asked, as he followed her to the door.

'To-night at eight. I shall see Tom to-morrow

morning at breakfast; he won't even now know that I have been in London. I am supposed to be ill in my room,' she laughed. 'Violent neuralgia, not able to see anybody.'

'You are a wonderful woman?' Farley said, as he let her out.

'But I'm not sure that I could stand her,' he thought as he went back to his letters; 'she is a trifle too diplomatic for my taste.'

'Just like Farley's impudence to think that I should marry him,' Mrs. Lakeman said to herself as she drove along. 'He's not quite in my line, I can tell him. Still, he adds a little amusement to the occasion.' She was full of pleasant excitement, curious to see how much her dramatic power would accomplish with Margaret, and resolved, at any rate, to thoroughly enjoy the interview.

CHAPTER XXX

MARGARET meanwhile awoke full of happiness. She was engaged to Tom Carringford, and she was going back to her mother to-day—it seemed too good to be true. A telegram came from Tom before she had finished her breakfast; he was safe at Perth, and just starting onwards. She wondered how Lena was, and what her illness could be. It was dreadful for Mrs. Lakeman, she thought, and she was glad that Tom had gone. The post brought a letter from her mother, it was dated two days ago; but they were slow in posting things at Woodside Farm; probably it had been put on one side and forgotten. Mrs. Vincent was not very well; it was only a cold, but it had affected her heart, the doctor said, and she must be kept very quiet; there was not the least danger, and she would write again to-morrow. She begged Margaret not to think of coming, for Hannah was very bitter—she doubted if she would let her in, and Mr. Garratt had been yesterday and made matters worse. 'Hannah is fond of saying,' Mrs. Vincent went on, 'that the door is locked and barred against you, and shall remain so till she

is forced to open it. She told Mr. Garratt so yesterday when he wanted your address. He said he should never care for anybody but you; and she told him not to come here again, and that if he did he should find the door shut, as you would. Perhaps it will be better when we have heard from your father, for she was always in some fear of him.'

While Margaret was still reading her letter there was a sound of wheels in the cobbled street. Something stopped in front of the house, a loud knock echoed through it. She started to her feet and listened. For one horrible moment it struck her that Mr. Garratt had found her out. Then the door opened and Mrs. Lakeman entered. Her face was drawn, her lips were firmly shut; a strange, uncanny expression was in her eyes.

'Margaret,' she exclaimed. 'Margaret Vincent, my old lover's child. I have come to throw myself on your mercy.' She pushed Margaret back on the sofa, threw herself at her feet, and burst into what sounded like hysterical tears.

Mrs. Lakeman had got her dramatic moment and was enjoying it immensely.

Margaret was aghast. 'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Is it Lena? Has anything happened to her?'

Mrs. Lakeman struggled for utterance; when she gained it her words were thick, her voice desperate. 'I have come to ask you for her life,' she said.

'Me?'

'Your telegram has killed her.'

'Oh!' Margaret's face blanched, for she saw what was coming. Mrs. Lakeman raised herself; she sat down on the sofa and took Margaret's hands, and looked at her with eyes as strangely blue as they were mocking.

'Margaret,' she said, 'I have done a desperate thing; but my child has been ill, she has been fretting and waiting for her lover—for the boy who has always been her lover. She can't bear separation from him. Yesterday morning I sent for him, and told him she was dangerously ill; at five o'clock your telegram——'

'It was Tom's telegram.'

Mrs. Lakeman was impatient at the interruption. 'Tom's telegram, then—came. By an accident it was given into her hands instead of mine, and a quarter of an hour later I was bending over her, wondering if she would ever open her eyes again. Tom has been ours—all his life,' Mrs. Lakeman went on vehemently; 'he and she have grown up together, he has always loved her, he has done everything for us, they were never three days apart till we went to Scotland the other day. She worships him, and it has been the one hope of my life to see them married. She has never dreamt of anything else, he is the air she breathes, and the world she lives in.' She stopped and took a long breath before she added in an undertone that

was really effective, 'When that telegram came yesterday it struck her like a death-blow.'

'Oh, but Tom and I love each other,' Margaret cried in despair.

'No, dear,' Mrs. Lakeman answered impressively. 'You must know the truth, for my child's life hangs on it. He does not love you—he loves her. He may have been infatuated with you during the last fortnight in which he has been parted from her. It's so like Tom,' she added in a more cheerful voice, for she found the tragic *rôle* a difficult one to maintain. 'He has been infatuated so often.'

'So often?' repeated Margaret incredulously.

'Oh, yes,' Mrs. Lakeman answered, with a little scornful amusement. 'You wouldn't believe how many times he has come to me to confess that he had made an idiot of himself. He is always falling in love, and getting engaged, and going to be married.'

'I can't believe it—I won't believe it!' Margaret cried passionately.

'It's quite true,' Mrs. Lakeman answered coolly. 'Generally I have managed to conceal everything from Lena, and to get him out of his scrapes—I have known perfectly well that they were only boyish nonsense, for at the bottom of his heart, Margaret Vincent,' she went on, resuming her solemnity, 'he loves no one but my child; any other woman would be miserable with him. You

won't give him any trouble?' she asked insultingly; 'you will give him up quietly, won't you?'

'I can't—I can't believe it.'

'You would have believed it,' Mrs. Lakeman said slowly, opening her eyes wide, and this time contriving to keep the humour out of them, 'if you saw her lying straight and still in her little room at Pitlochry, as she would have been doing now but for my presence of mind.'

'What do you mean?' Margaret asked, scared by Mrs. Lakeman's manner.

'You mustn't ask me—' she dropped her voice again, and the words appeared to be dragged from her—'I can't tell you; it shall never pass my lips. I shouldn't dare to tell you,' she whispered; 'I have left her with a woman I can trust, more dead than alive. I told her I would come and ask her life of you, and I have come, Margaret. You are your father's child, and will do the right and just thing by another woman?'

'I don't know what to do,' Margaret said desperately; and, rising quickly, she walked up and down clasping her head in her hands, trying to think clearly. The whole thing was theatrical and unreal, and the mocking look in Mrs. Lakeman's eyes nearly drove her mad.

'It won't break your heart to give him up—it can't.' Mrs. Lakeman's tone was a trifle contemptuous. 'You were in love with the other young man only a few weeks ago.'

'I was never in love with Mr. Garratt,' Margaret answered indignantly; 'never for a moment.'

'You may think so now, just as Tom thinks he cares for you; but you did care for him. George Stringer saw it directly, and Tom saw it the day he had tea with you all. In fact, he thought it was more on your side than on his,' she added, watching the effect of her words with an amusement she could scarcely control. 'He came and told us about it at once—he tells us everything; he was so funny when he described it all,' Mrs. Lakeman added, as if the remembrance were highly diverting. Then recovering, she asked in a deep voice, 'What are you going to do, Margaret? Are you going to give me back my child's life?'

'I am going to wait and see Tom, and hear what he says.'

'I can't believe you will be so cruel.'

'I don't understand,' Margaret cried desperately. 'If Lena is so very ill, if she is dying, why have you left her?'

'Because I knew that there was only one thing that could save her.'

'You must have started directly the telegram arrived.'

'I did—as soon as she recovered her senses. I told you she was with some one I could trust; I have been in the train all night.' From her tone

it might have been a torture-chamber. 'I have come to throw myself on your mercy. I felt that for a fortnight's foolish infatuation, you couldn't be so cruel as to wreck my child's whole life. Your father would not let you do it, Margaret. Be worthy of him, dear; be the noble woman you ought to be and give him up.'

Mrs. Gilman entered with two telegrams. Mrs. Lakeman gave a little suppressed shriek; but there was unreality in it and Margaret felt it at the back of her head.

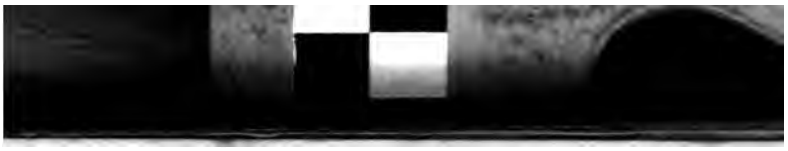
'There 's one for you, ma'am, and one for Miss Vincent,' Mrs. Gilman said.

Mrs. Lakeman chattered her teeth till Mrs. Gilman had left the room. 'I can't open it,' she said, and tried to make her hand tremble. But Margaret had read hers already.

'*Forgive me, dear*,' it ran, '*I am here with Lena. Better go home.—Tom.*' She stood rigid and scarcely able to believe her eyes. Was it true, then? It never for a moment occurred to her that a telegram was the easiest thing in the world to forge, or that any one would be so improbably wicked as to forge one.

'Thank God!' exclaimed Mrs. Lakeman, holding out her telegram to Margaret. '*We are together again and happy, darling. Be gentle to little Margaret.—Lena.*'

'Now do you see?' said Mrs. Lakeman triumphantly.



'Yes, I see,' Margaret said. 'You needn't have come,' she added, with white lips that almost refused to move.

'I came partly out of love for you,' Mrs. Lakeman began, and then seeing how ill this chimed in with her previous remarks, she added lamely, 'and I couldn't let my child die.'

'What do you want me to do?' Margaret was in despair.

'Will you go to Paris for a time as my guest? You might start to-night. A former maid of mine could go with you. It would do you a world of good. It would be better to go away for a time, dear.'

'I won't,' Margaret answered quite simply and doggedly. 'If Tom loves Lena better than he does me, let him go to her, but I shall stay here.'

Then Mrs. Lakeman had an inspiration. 'Go out to your father in Australia,' she said. 'A cousin of mine is a director of one of the largest lines of steamers; I 'll make him put a state room at your disposal. You 'll come back in a vastly different position from your present one. Cyril can't live many months—I shouldn't be surprised if he 's dead already, and you of course will be the daughter of Lord Eastleigh.' She stopped, for Mrs. Gilman entered again—with a cablegram. Perhaps the gods were listening and thought the moment an apt one for its arrival.

'It is from my father,' Margaret said with a quivering lip. 'We cabled to him yesterday.' She opened it, and the violent effort to keep back her tears brought the colour to her face. It contained the one word—'*delighted.*'

'What does he say?' Mrs. Lakeman asked.

'It doesn't matter, it makes no difference,' Margaret answered, crushing it in her hand. 'I will give up Tom, Mrs. Lakeman, but you must go away now, for I feel as if I can't bear any one's presence. And I can't go away—you must manage as you please, but I shall stay here.'

'But there 's something else I want you to do,' Mrs. Lakeman said. 'I want you to promise not to write to Tom—for Lena's sake? If he heard that I had asked you——'

'Doesn't he know that you have come?'

'He doesn't dream it; and I 'm going back to Pitlochry this evening.'

'But I don't understand? Where is Tom, and where does he think you are?'

'Tom is with Lena,' Mrs. Lakeman said with a confident smile; 'and he doesn't miss me, he is too happy. I couldn't humiliate my child in her future husband's eyes'—Margaret quailed at the word—'by letting him know that I had come to beg her life of a woman for whom he had had a passing infatuation. Now,' she added, and her manner showed her alertness for practical detail. 'Why won't you go to Australia? It could be

managed in three days, outfit, everything: the mail goes on Friday.'

'I can't go,' and Margaret's tone was positive. 'I don't wish to leave my mother.'

'Your dear mother,' Mrs. Lakeman said, with a funny little twitch. 'Go home to her, Margaret; let me drive you to the station and know that you are on your way back to the farm?'

'I cannot,' Margaret answered. 'I will do as you wish about Tom, and I will not tell him that you came to me; but you must leave the rest in my hands.'

'But how is he to know?' said Mrs. Lakeman, feeling that in a moment her house of cards might fall. 'How is he to know that you give him up?'

'I will write that to him,' Margaret said bitterly.

'You had better telegraph at once.'

These telegrams were becoming a nightmare, but Margaret felt that at any cost she must get rid of Mrs. Lakeman.

'Oh, yes, I will telegraph if you like.' She crossed over to the table at which she and Tom had sat only yesterday joyfully writing their messages.

'Tell him you are going away,' Mrs. Lakeman said. 'Oh, Margaret, you don't know how they have loved each other all these years.'

'You said he had been infatuated so often?'

'He has always laughed at it afterwards,' Mrs. Lakeman answered with airy triumph.

Margaret took up her pen and wrote—'*Stay with Lena, I don't want you. I am going away. —Margaret.*'

'You had better put your surname, too,' Mrs. Lakeman said, and she wrote it. 'I 'll take it for you, dear, you don't want to go out just yet, nor to let the landlady see it. Now tell me what you mean to do?' she asked, in a good, business-like tone.

'I don't know,' Margaret answered gently. 'I want to be alone and to think. I have done all I could—it has been very hard to do, and I hope Lena will be happy. Please go, I can't bear it any longer unless I 'm alone.'

Mrs. Lakeman took her in her arms and kissed her, and though Margaret submitted, she could hardly keep back a shudder.

'It 's rather a desperate game,' Mrs. Lakeman thought, as she drove away; 'but it 's thoroughly amusing. The best way will be to insist on Tom marrying Lena at once—a special licence. A man is often caught in a rebound.'

CHAPTER XXXI

MARGARET sometimes wondered how she lived through that day. Mr. Farley sent her a little note releasing her from her engagement, but saying that if at any time she wanted to come back he would gladly take her on again. Margaret felt it to be a kindly letter. Oddly enough, too, a note came from the Agency in the Strand, asking her to call the next day. 'I will,' she thought, 'if I have had a letter from mother and she is better.' At the bottom of her heart there was some uneasiness: once or twice it occurred to her that she would go back to Chidhurst and ask a neighbour to take her in, but the inhabitants of Woodside Farm had always kept their affairs to themselves, and she did not want to give occasion for gossip in the village. She read her mother's letter again. No, there was nothing in it to be alarmed about, it was only her own miserable state of mind that made her nervous. She was desperate, maddened, and ashamed every time she remembered Tom, and his kisses, and her own protestations to him. She couldn't bear to think that he was with Lena—Lena, who would never

love him as she did. Somehow, too, at the bottom of her heart, she felt that there was trickery in the whole business. She didn't know how or where, only that Mrs. Lakeman's manner had not been real; but everything in the world had become unreal and torturing. There was only one thing left that could comfort her—home. She hungered and thirsted to be there. She wanted to see her mother's face, to sit on the arm of her chair in the living-room, to talk to her,—even to hear Hannah scold. And she wanted to go up to the wood, and to think out the nightmare of the last few hours in her cathedral. She imagined the great rest of arriving at Haslemere Station, of walking the long miles to Woodside Farm, of entering the porch and finding her mother sitting there. Oh! but it was no good, Hannah would not allow her to enter. Hannah was a firm woman who kept her word, and would think that she proved her religion by being cruel. The day went on and no telegram came from Tom, and the latent hope she had unconsciously cherished vanished. It was all true then, and he really cared for Lena.

'I 'm glad mother didn't know,' she thought, 'it would have made her so unhappy when this ending came, and I couldn't have borne Hannah's gibes.' She longed desperately for some one to speak to, but there was no one; besides, her lips were virtually closed. Suddenly she remembered

Miss Hunstan, she would write to her. But no, it was impossible, she had left Bayreuth and the new address had not yet come. 'And I don't know what to do, or what to say to father,' she thought. 'Oh, it is maddening. If it were really a case of life and death I could bear it, but this is some trick, I know it—it is a case of sham life and death.'

Late in the afternoon Sir George Stringer called. He entered awkwardly as if he were afraid of meeting her, but the moment he saw her face he knew that something was the matter, and all his self-consciousness vanished.

'I told you I should come again,' he said; 'there is no reason why I shouldn't look after my old friend's girl, is there?'

'No, none,' she answered, hardly able to collect her senses sufficiently to talk to him.

He looked at her sharply. 'Something is the matter,' he said; 'you have been crying?'

'Oh, no—yes I have been crying, I am very homesick.' He put his hand on hers as her father might have done.

'Then take my advice, and go home, dear,' he said. 'Is the stage fever over?'

'Yes, I suppose that's over.'

He looked at her again, then suddenly he asked, 'Has Tom Carringford been playing fast and loose with you?'

'Don't ask me any questions, dear Sir George;

I don't want to say anything at all. He is in Scotland with Lena Lakeman.'

'He is a fool,' he said, with conviction.

'So am I,' she answered ruefully.

'And I'm another. My dear, I'm not going to ask you to tell me anything you want to keep to yourself—' He stopped for a moment, then he said awkwardly, 'I suppose what I suggested the other day is impossible?' For answer she only nodded, and her eyes filled with tears. 'Then we won't say anything more about it.' He took her hands and held them tightly in his own; 'but I want to be your friend—your father, if you like, till your own returns. If you can't go home to your mother, or if that young bounder at Guildford worries you, or if there is any reason of that sort, why shouldn't you go to my house by the church and shut yourself up there? You would be very comfortable; I thought of going there myself, but I could easily go somewhere else.'

It seemed a good idea at first and she caught at it; then she shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'people would know and they would talk.'

'I suppose they would—damn them. I wish you'd tell me what Master Tom has been up to?'

'I can't talk about him to-day, Sir George; I can't talk about anything—my head is so bad. Please go now,' she said, but so very gently it was impossible that he could be hurt, 'and come and

see me to-morrow; my mother is not well and I am worried. To-morrow I shall have thought out plans and will gladly talk them over with you. I want some one's help and advice.'

I think you do,' he answered; 'and I 'll come to-morrow, my dear.'

Margaret sat and thought again when she was alone; she had thought and thought since Mrs. Lakeman had gone that morning till her head was dazed, but it was no good, the whole thing was a *cul-de-sac*. Then an inspiration seized her. 'I 'll write to Hannah,' she said, 'and beg her to let me go home and see my mother—for a little while at any rate. She 'll get the letter in the morning, and I 'll ask her to telegraph if I may go.' She sat down at once and told Hannah with all the vehemence in her heart that she had never cared for Mr. Garratt, that perhaps she had even cared for somebody else, that she had given up her engagement at Mr. Farley's theatre, that she was miserable about her mother, and wanted to come and see her; would Hannah telegraph in the morning if she might come, even for a few hours? She felt better when she had written it, for she thought that Hannah must relent when she had read it; and for Margaret there seemed to be just one possibility of rest, one haven left in the world —her mother's arms. She put on her hat quickly as if to hurry her letter on its way, and was just starting for the post-office when Dawson Farley

appeared. His heart had smote him for his share in the morning's transactions.

'I thought I would come round and tell you how sorry I am at your resignation,' he said.

'And it was so unnecessary after all, for my sudden engagement to Mr. Carringford is broken off.'

'I know.'

'How do you know?' she asked astonished.

'Mrs. Lakeman came to see me and told me.'

'Oh, yes, Mrs. Lakeman,' she answered bitterly. 'Is Lena really dangerously ill?' She wondered at her own question, but some other self had asked it—a self that doubted everything.

Mr. Farley, too, was taken by surprise. 'I suppose so,' he said, with a little smile. 'Mrs. Lakeman's facts are sometimes a little elusive; but she can hardly have invented that one. Carringford has always been by way of—I mean he has always been considered Lena Lakeman's property.' Quite suddenly Margaret lost her self-control for a moment, and shudderingly put her hands over her face.

'I 'm sorry if she 's ill, but I do dislike her so,' she said.

Mr. Farley, too, was off his guard. 'I hate her,' he said quickly. 'Tell me frankly what you think about it.'

But Margaret shook her head. 'I oughtn't to have said that; and I can't talk about it, Mr. Farley.

I 'm sure you will understand that the whole thing is painful and not one that I can discuss.'

'At any rate, I may congratulate you on your father's probable return?'

'Oh, he will not be here for a long time.'

'But you know that his brother is dead?'

She started to her feet. 'When did he die—how did you know?'

'He died yesterday after an operation at Melbourne. I have just seen it in an evening paper.'

'Oh, my dear mother, she will get my father back,' burst from Margaret's lips. 'She is ill, but this news will make her better. I have been writing to my half-sister'—and she took up the letter, 'I will open it and tell her, for she may not know.' Without knowing it she showed her impatience to be alone, and in a few minutes Dawson Farley discreetly took his leave.

'I 'm not going on with it,' he thought as he walked back to Victoria Street. 'I like that girl, she is dignified and courageous, and I can't be turned into a common scoundrel to please Mrs. Lakeman. I feel as if I had had enough of that lady. She is too fond of putting surprises into one's life to be altogether to my taste.' His thoughts went out to Louise Hunstan; but all that was for ever at an end. He had been a fool, and he knew it; he pressed his lips together, till he looked hard and almost cruel—yet there were good points in Dawson Farley. 'If Louise had

been content with what I could give her, it might have been all right,' he thought. 'She is too clever,' he added uneasily, for he knew that Louise had found him out, and could never be anything more than friendly, clear-sighted and friendly, with perhaps now and then a touch of sentiment, not for him, but for the man she had once imagined him to be, and the days of that happy delusion. 'It is a mistake for a woman to be clever,' he thought drearily; 'it never answers in the long run; if it prevents her from boring one, it chokes one off in another way; a man wants supremacy, and he hates a woman to get it—unless he gives it her—and that's the long and the short of it.'

CHAPTER XXXII

It was past seven when Margaret came in from posting her letter; she had walked on almost unconsciously for an hour or two—into the city, deserted after the business of the day, and back by the Embankment to avoid the traffic near the theatres.

The last few hours had been so full of events that they had changed the whole current of her life; but as yet she was hardly able to take in all the meanings attached to them. Her engagement to Tom, his departure, Mrs. Lakeman's visit and that nightmare of telegrams, Sir George Stringer, Dawson Farley, and the news of her uncle's death, all had come at once, or within four-and-twenty hours; it was difficult to believe them true. She felt like a woman in a dream struggling to awake, or as if everything that had happened concerned some one else rather than herself: it would surely be impossible to bear the ruin of her own life so calmly? Oh, if she could realise it more acutely—she longed for pain, for anything that would make her feel that she was still alive.

Mrs. Gilman let her in, evidently full of

pleasant excitement. 'Miss Hunstan is coming back,' she exclaimed. 'I have just had a letter and knew you would like to be told. She expects to be here in a day or two—she will be pleased about you and Mr. Carringford.'

Margaret stopped, wondering what to do—but Mrs. Gilman would have to know, she thought; better get it over. 'But perhaps we are not going to be married after all—Mr. Carringford and I,' she said lamely. 'We made up our minds too quickly.'

'Oh, no, miss, I couldn't think that; and if I know anything about it, he loves the ground you walk on. There was a glow in his face whenever I let him in, or whenever he was with you, that did one good to see.'

But Margaret on her way upstairs answered nothing.

Mrs. Gilman called after her. 'Oh, Miss Vincent, I forgot to say there's a letter for you—you'll find it on the drawing-room table.'

A letter! She went almost headlong into the room, wondering—but Tom couldn't have written so soon, she reflected.

The letter had the Chidhurst postmark; it was directed in an uneducated hand, and consisted of half a sheet of note-paper on which was written almost illegibly—

'*I think mother is very ill, but Hannah will not*

have it. Do not say I wrote. Better come at once, or it will be too late. From—Towsey.'

A cry escaped from Margaret's lips: pain had come to her now acutely enough.

'Oh, mother, mother, if you should die! How could I think of anything else in the world when you were ill; but I didn't know, darling, I never dreamt it.'

In ten minutes she was on her way to Waterloo. The hansom went so slowly she beat the doors with her fists in her impatience. All thought of Tom had vanished or been pushed into the background; the older love asserted itself, and every thought was concentrated on the dear life at Chidhurst. She had just time to catch the train—it went at 7.45—it wanted two minutes to the quarter when she reached the station. She bounded from the cab almost before it had stopped, handed the fare to the man, and flew to the booking-office. It seemed as if the clerk gave her a ticket with deliberate slowness, she snatched it, and fled to the platform. The doors were being closed, she had just time to enter an empty carriage before the train started. Thank Heaven she was alone. She could walk up and down and wring her hands or throw herself upon the seat, or lean her head against the side of the carriage and pray—to any power that existed and was merciful. 'Let her live—let her live! She mustn't die while father is away,

it would be so cruel. Mother—mother darling, you mustn't die. Father is on his way back, and I am coming to you—don't you feel that I am coming?'

Oh, the misery of it, and the slow, slow plodding of a train that goes towards a house over which death hovers. It seemed to Margaret as if hours had passed before she even reached Woking, though it was something to be in the dear Surrey country once again. The door opened when the train stopped and two people got in, they looked like man and wife. Margaret locked her hands and clenched her teeth as she had done in the morning to bear calmly the presence of Mrs. Lakeman, and presently, in her dim corner, she shut her eyes and pretended to sleep, though every pulse was throbbing with impatience. She heard the woman say to the man—and it made her start, for Annie was her mother's name—though they of course had nothing to do with her.

'I think Annie 's growing taller, don't you?'

'I dare say,' the man answered; 'she's a girl I never cared for myself.' He stopped a moment as if considering. 'Do you think Tom means anything by it?'

Tom, too! Margaret thought.

'Well, they seem to think he's looking after Mabel Margetson,' the woman said.

'There'd be some money there?'

'A good bit, no doubt; but money isn't everything.'

No, money isn't everything, Margaret's heart answered them. Money is nothing after a certain point; nothing is anything except the love of your dearest, the sound of a living voice, the sight of a dear face, the touch of a thin gaunt cheek against your own. 'Oh, she must live,' she cried dumbly to herself, though never a sign or movement betrayed it. 'I wish I could send my own life into your heart, darling; but live—live till father comes. Oh, dear Christ, if You can see into our hearts, as people say, let my mother live, or if she must die soon, still let her live till my father comes—or till I get to her,' she added in despair, for in her heart she felt as if the rest were denied, 'we love her, love her best on earth as she does us.'

'Why, here's Guildford already,' the woman said. 'I declare this train is in a hurry.' She reached down the basket that was in the rack, the man rose, they opened the carriage door, and once again Margaret was left alone.

The oil in the lamp burnt low and flickered; she opened the window at the other end—they were both open—and the soft darkness of the summer night came in. She knelt by the carriage door, and rested her arms on the window frame and her face down on them; it gave her a devotional feeling, it made her love the land and the trees

and the great sky above them ; they had always seemed to understand everything : it seemed as if they did now. The scent of the pines came to her, she could see the fir trees black and dim as the train rushed past ; she felt as if all nature knew the misery in her heart—the idea soothed her and made her able to bear it calmly. She looked up at the little stars that had been there thousands of years before she was born, and would be in thousands of years to come—at the stars and the deep grey sky, at the black trees that made the shadows, and the woods she had never trodden yet knew so well, at the rough fence that bounded the railway line and the little bank against it—everything seemed to know, as she passed by, that she was going to her mother, only to find that nothing, nothing in this wide world could alter the inexorable law of nature, the great decree when it had once been given.

There were three little stations to pass before she reached Haslemere. The station-master's gardens were bright with flowers, she could see plainly the patches of colour in the darkness, the scent of late sweet peas was wafted to her. She could see the Surrey cottages as the train went on ; here and there a light shone from an upper window—lattice windows generally, like her mother's. Behind them people were going to bed ; they were not ill, not dying, as perhaps her mother was, in the big bed at Woodside Farm.

A brook, some trees, a house built up high on the bank a little way back from the road, the slackening of the train—and Haslemere at last. The engine seemed to hurry to the farthest end of the platform on purpose, and she was impatient at every yard she had to tread. She hurried along, gave up her ticket, passed through the narrow doorway of the station and out again on the other side. It was nearly ten o'clock, late hours for the country side. The inn on the high bank opposite was closed.

'Too late for a fly?' she asked the porter: he was a new man and did not know her.

'Too late to-night, miss, unless it's ordered beforehand,' and he turned out an extra gaslight. Almost before the words were said she had darted forward; she was young and strong, and her feet were swift. She hurried up the hill on the right, past the inn at the top—she could see the white post and the little dark patch above that constituted the sign. On and on, past the smithy, and the cobbler's, the wheelwright's, and the little cottages with thatched roofs and white fenced-in gardens. She could have walked a hundred miles—flung them behind her with disdain—it was the time, it was the time! Life hurried away so at the last, and might not stay even for her longing or her praying. She turned off from the main road, over a bridge on the right—a narrow road hardly wide enough for two carriages to pass—the

oaks and plane trees leant out above the hedges, she could see the trailing outline, against the sky, of a little clump of larches—a deep blue sky now in which the stars had gathered closer.

Nearly three miles were behind her. She was near the outbuildings of a farm that was half-way to Chidhurst; she smelt the newly-garnered grain in them as she passed. Another quarter of a mile and she had come to the edge of the moor. Along the white road beside it—the road she had driven with her father the day she had returned from London, and that Mr. Garratt had trotted along so often with his fat grey pony or his mare, pleased and jaunty, with his hunting-crop in his right hand. The bell heather was dead, the gorse was turning brown, she knew that there must be patches of ling, but it was too dark to see them.

On she hurried, the white road was stretching behind her instead of in front. Another mile and she had come to Chidhurst village; it was still and sleeping. How strange it seemed to skurry through it at this hour. A few minutes more and the square tower of the church stood out before her. The darkness had lifted so well that she could see the clock; it had stopped, of course—at a quarter past six. A lump came to her throat and her heart stood still, for low on the ground beneath the church tower she saw the whiteness of the tombstones round the church. She turned her head quickly away; on the other side of the

road were the gates of Sir George Stringer's house —the sight of them gave her comfort—and on her right at last was the little gateway to the fields that made the short cut to the farm. She gave a cry of thankfulness as she went through it, and stood on her mother's land once more. It was only a month since she had slept on the green ground beneath her feet, and kissed it and wondered when she would walk over it again. She had not thought it would be so soon. Across the field by one of the pathways that made a white line leading to the stile, over the stile and into the second field, and she ran now, for she knew that in a moment she would see the house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SUDDENLY dim and yellow amidst the darkness she saw her mother's window and there was a light in it. She gave a cry of thankfulness, and felt as if Heaven had heard her. Then another fear presented itself; it had been haunting her all through the journey, but in the overwhelming dread of not finding her mother alive she had not stayed to consider it. What would Hannah do? Would she refuse to let her enter the house while her mother was ill—perhaps dying? The letter of passionate explanation and entreaty she had written that afternoon was still in the post, it would not arrive till the morning, there was not yet the chance of its softening her. She had no right to keep Margaret out; but it was no good considering any question of right now; she dreaded high words and Hannah's rasping voice. Her feet flagged as she went down the green path of the Dutch garden; she stood irresolute at the bottom of it, looking up at the dimly-lighted window, wondering what to do. The front door was certain to be bolted at this time of night, and probably every one was upstairs, so that no one

would hear her if she tapped, and she was afraid to ring lest she should disturb her mother. She went softly past the house, beside the flower-bed against the wall and beneath her own bedroom window, round to the back door by which she had left the house a month ago, and cautiously tried the latch. It was fastened on the inside as she had known it would be. Then suddenly a light came from the kitchen window, evidently some one had entered with a candle; perhaps Towsey had come down, or Hannah—she was afraid to knock lest it should be Hannah. A thick muslin blind was drawn over the window, which was so high that Margaret was not tall enough to look in. She remembered the four-legged stool painted grey—it generally stood between the wood-house and the back door; the postman used to sit on it sometimes and talk to Towsey while he rested. If she stood on that she might see into the kitchen. She found it and, still not making a sound, put it down beneath the window, mounted, and looked in. Through the muslin curtain she could see Towsey by the fire-place; she had put a little saucepan on the fire, and was beginning to stir something that was in it, and there was no one else in the kitchen. Margaret tapped gently, and Towsey started as if she divined that it was Margaret; she came to the window, and lifting the curtain, looked out. Margaret put her head close to the glass so that in the darkness there could be no mistake of her identity.

Then Towsey signed to her to go to the back door, and went and softly unbarred it. She only opened it a little way and put out her head as if she were afraid that even a whisper might be heard inside the house.

'Miss Margaret,' she said, 'I knew you would be here.'

'Is she better?' Margaret asked breathlessly.

Towsey shook her head. 'She's never going to be better,' she whispered; 'but she's always been a healthy woman, and it may take a deal of dying to bring her to the end.'

The words smote Margaret, and she held on to the doorway to support herself.

'Is Hannah with her?' she asked.

'Yes, she is with her, you may be sure of that.'

'Didn't she mean to send for me at all?'

'I don't know. You see it has all been so sudden; she was only took worse last night.'

'Did she get a telegram yesterday?'

'Ay, late yesterday afternoon. She said I wasn't to say anything to Hannah about it. She looked as if she were pleased. Hannah had gone over to Petersfield for the afternoon when it came and didn't get back till half an hour after.'

'What is the matter with mother? She didn't seem anxious in her letters—I never dreamt of this.' The tears were falling down Margaret's face but she did not know it.

'It's her heart, I expect; we sent Daddy for

the doctor at nine o'clock last night, and he came again this morning — he hadn't been since last week. He said she was better; but he didn't think well of her.'

'Has Hannah said nothing about me?'

'I asked her if she meant to write, but she told me to mind my work and leave her to mind other things.'

'And then?'

'And then I just got George Canning to write those lines and post them in Haslemere when he went for the physic. I thought if he posted it before twelve you'd likely get it to-night.'

'I did—I did!' Margaret put her hand on Towsey's arm in token of gratitude.

'I knew what you'd feel,' Towsey said in a dull voice, as if she were half afraid of what she had done, and slowly preparing to abide by the consequences. She turned her head quickly for a moment and listened, but all was dark and still in the passage: there was no sound at all in the house save the loud ticking of the clock at the foot of the stairs.

'Has mother asked for me?' Margaret whispered.

'Ay, every hour.'

'I must come in, I will come in!' she repeated desperately.

'You have a right to,' Towsey answered; 'but after she come from London she said she would

turn me from the door if I ever opened it to you.'

'Oh, I must see my mother!' Margaret said, and a sob came to her throat. 'She has no right to keep me from her.'

'That's true enough, Miss Margaret. But she's that bitter I believe she'd shut the door on you if your mother was lying dead.'

'I would insist, but it might be useless, and it would be so terrible to have a quarrel now; it might kill her. She's my mother, too, Towsey——'

'And Hannah may say what she pleases, you shall enter,' whispered Towsey with determination, and opened the door wide. Margaret went swiftly past her into the kitchen. Towsey shut the door softly, and went after her. 'You'll be tired with the journey,' she said; 'let me get you some food.'

'I don't want anything to eat or drink; I want to creep up and be near mother, even if I can't see her—oh, I wonder if Hannah would prevent my seeing her?'

'Ay, that she would,' said Towsey, with conviction. 'You'd better sit a bit,' and she brought forward a chair very carefully, so that the sound of it should not be heard above: and still they spoke in whispers.

'Is there no hope?' Margaret asked chokingly.

Towsey shook her head. 'Hannah won't believe

she's going, but I can see it. I have seen many go, and know the signs. The pain's gone—it's never been very bad—but it's all gone now. She's just waiting for death, though I don't think it will come till she's seen you.'

'But couldn't you tell Hannah that mother is dying?'

Towsey shook her head. 'She doesn't see it; and you can never make Hannah believe anything she doesn't think inside her.'

'Is she likely to come down?'

'Perhaps she'll be down presently for the arrow-root. Look you, Miss Margaret, I'll make an excuse and go up for something. You take off your shoes and walk softly by me, keeping well to the side of the staircase. There's only the little lamp in the room, and there's no light outside; Hannah'll not see even if she looks out.'

'But what shall I do when I get up?' Margaret asked, too dazed to think for herself. She took off her hat as she spoke and put it on the table. Towsey lifted it gently and hid it in the settle where she kept her own things.

'As I go into the room you can slip into the cupboard outside the door, you'll find it open—and hide among the things hanging up. I'll try and get Hannah down and keep her to eat a bit of supper, then perhaps you could steal in for a moment without any one knowing you are there.'

'But if it did her harm—if it excited her?'

'It won't,' said Towsey firmly; 'it 'll make her happy before she goes, it would be terrible if she died without seeing you or her husband, when she 's waiting and longing for you both that badly she can scarce breathe.'

'Let us come at once,' whispered Margaret, dragging herself hopelessly from the chair.

They crept out of the kitchen together. Margaret put her hand in Towsey's and the tears came into the old woman's eyes: 'I nursed you a lot of times when you were a baby,' she whispered; 'and now you are such a beauty—she said it,' and she nodded upward, 'only yesterday.'

They went along the passage and stopped near the foot of the stairs that were between the kitchen door and the door of the best parlour, for they could hear Hannah's voice. She was sitting by her mother's bedside reading the Bible. Towsey went up a few steps and craned her neck, and returned.

'The door 's nearly to,' she whispered.

Margaret softly followed Towsey upstairs, keeping close to the wall till she reached the landing, then she slipt through the open doorway of the great cupboard that was next her mother's room. She remembered how she had looked into it the day that Tom Carringford came to the farm four months ago. Her mother's long cloak and best dress had been hanging there then. They were there now. Margaret knew the feel of them so

well—it gave her a thrill to touch them. It was quite dark inside the cupboard, even if the door were open and Hannah passed, she would not be likely to see her. She was afraid to move the door lest it should be noticed, but she hid a little way behind it.

Towsey, seeing she was safe, looked in at Hannah who, perhaps, made some sign to her for she went slowly down to the kitchen again. Then, as Margaret stood hidden and listening, out of her mother's bedroom door there came still the sound of Hannah's voice reading of love and mercy.

Presently Mrs. Vincent asked feebly, 'Has any one come?'

Did she know? Margaret wondered.

'The doctor said he wouldn't be here again to-day—he thought you better this morning,' Hannah answered.

'I feel sure I am dying, Hannah. I shall never see him again.'

'She is thinking of my father,' Margaret thought, and could hardly keep herself from crying out.

'You don't know how to do with illness,' Hannah said; 'you've not had any for so long. We are all in God's hands, remember that.'

'I want you to send for Margaret—she's so young,' Mrs. Vincent pleaded; 'I can't bear to think of her away from home.'

But Hannah answered firmly. 'She has disgraced us, mother.'

'She has done nothing wrong,' Mrs. Vincent answered; 'you couldn't make me believe that.'

'She has disgraced us with her play actors and her forwardness. Would you have an unbeliever beside your sick-bed?'

'But I want her—and her father,' Mrs. Vincent moaned. 'I can't die without seeing them again.'

'You are making too much of the illness,' Hannah answered anxiously. 'People have more of it before they die.'

'Tell Towsey to send for Margaret,' Mrs. Vincent said, as if her mind were detaching itself from Hannah's argument.

'She shall not cross the doorstep,' Hannah said; 'and if you were dying, it would be for your salvation's sake that I would still say it; for one must have fear of God as well as love of God. Let us go on with the reading, mother.'

'I can't listen—I want them. There is the sea between him and me, but you can send for Margaret.'

'You are tired and had better sleep a little,' Hannah said for answer, and for all her firmness, her manner was kind, as though she were striving to save a soul at bitter cost to her own heart. No answer came to her last words, and five minutes went by, they seemed like hours

to Margaret; then Hannah spoke again, and her voice was different, there was something akin to fear in it.

'Mother, why do you look round so' she asked, 'do you see anything?'

'I'm looking for Margaret,' the faint voice said.

'You'd better try to rest; you'll be stronger if you sleep a little.' But for answer there was only a moaning whisper that Margaret's heart told her was her own name, and in agony she rocked to and fro and clung to her mother's skirt hung against the wall, and kissed it, and the tears came into her eyes and scalded them.

'I will go and get you a cup of arrowroot,' she heard Hannah say; 'it is past midnight, and time that you had nourishment.' She pushed back the chair on which she had been sitting, came out of the room and, passing the door of the cupboard in which her sister was hiding, went downstairs.

Margaret slipped softly from her hiding-place and stood just inside her mother's doorway; and it seemed as if her mother knew, for she moved her head a little.

'Margaret!' she gasped.

Then Margaret knelt by the bedside. 'Mother —mother!' she whispered, 'I am here—beside you.'

A look of fright and joy came into Mrs. Vincent's dulling eyes. 'Thank God, I've seen

you! Hannah won't believe that I am dying. Did Towsey——'

'Yes, darling, yes,' Margaret answered; 'and I love you so—I love you so. Get well, darling; father is coming back—he is coming immediately, perhaps he is on his way by this, get well for him,' she whispered between the kisses she rained on the thin face, and the hands that had a strange chill on them.

'I shall never see him,' Mrs. Vincent said; 'but tell him that I thought of him and of you all the time.'

'Oh, mother—mother——'

'Bless you, dear, bless you.' A happy smile came for a moment over Mrs. Vincent's face, though fear quenched it. 'If Hannah finds you she will drive you out. You must go—I couldn't bear it. I entreat you to go.'

'I will hide, darling. Towsey will manage it,' Margaret said.

'Hannah is very hard,' the dying woman whispered anxiously; 'but she doesn't mean it—and she's been very good to me—it's only because she's strict. Tell your father he will come to me, and I'll be waiting. Go, dear—I couldn't have died without seeing you.' With a last effort Mrs. Vincent kissed her again, but her lips would hardly move, though a cry of fear came through them, for Hannah had quickly crossed the hall below, and begun to ascend

the stairs; and Margaret knew that if she left the room she would meet her on the threshold. Mrs. Vincent's eyes turned towards the door, and remained fixed; a strange expression came to them, as if she saw many waiting and knew why they had come.

In a moment Margaret was on the other side of the bed and had hidden behind the screen that was partly round the top and down one side of it. She could not stand for trembling, she crouched on her knees and held her breath.

'Mother, I thought I heard you cry,' Hannah said, as she entered, but there came no sound for answer. 'Mother,' she said again, and waited; but all was still. Then Hannah went to the door and called: 'Towsey, Towsey, come here!' and Towsey, startled by her tone, came running in haste, and Margaret knew that they were standing together at the bedside. The moments went by with a strange stillness, dragging and terrible, as though an unseen host held on to them. She heard Towsey whisper: 'She is going,' she heard her mother's quick breathing, she heard her try to speak, but the words were only half articulated, and still she did not dare to move.

Hannah said: 'Mother, mother, Christ will save you; pray to Him!' and her mother whispered once more—

'Father and Margaret—and there will be James, too.' The breathing grew quicker, and the death-

rattle came in her throat. Margaret put her hands to her own throat and covered her mouth, and crouched lower and lower towards the floor, so that she might not cry out in her agony. Then all was still and she knew that her mother had died.

'She is better off, God be merciful to her, a sinner,' Hannah said. 'Let us say a prayer, Towsey.' And, when it was finished, she sat down in the arm-chair at the bedside.

It seemed to Margaret as if hours went by while she cowered and rocked in her hiding-place, hoping that presently the dead would be left alone for a little, and that then she might creep out and see her mother's face once more. But this was not to be, for after a time Hannah rose and called down the staircase: 'Towsey, you can come now, we must make her ready.' Then she came back into the room, and it seemed as if some spirit had whispered to her, for she walked round the bed and moved the screen behind which Margaret was hidden. She started back almost in horror when she saw the crouching figure.

'Margaret! is it you that have dared?'

Margaret stood up and faced her, and even Hannah saw that the young face was drawn with misery, and that her lips trembled.

'It is you that dared not to send for me,' she said in an agonised voice.

Hannah turned to the bed and drew the sheet over their mother's face.

'You had no right to be here,' she said.

'It was my right as well as yours to be by her; she was my mother too.'

'You gave up your right,' Hannah said doggedly; 'and the place is mine.' But she took care not to look at Margaret, and her hands were twitching.

Then Towsey came forward. 'For shame, Hannah!' she said; 'this is your mother's child you're speaking to, and in the presence of the dead. You can't mean that she's not to stay here.'

'Oh, you can't mean that I am not to stay while she is here?' Margaret said passionately, looking towards the bed. 'I think that the agony I have borne this last hour will set me free of hell, if it is true. You can think, if you like, that God has sent it me for punishment. But we needn't speak of these things,' she pleaded, 'I only want to stay in peace till she has gone for ever.'

'And it's peace that God gives,' said Towsey, 'to them that have suffered.'

'You can stay,' Hannah said, after a moment's silence. 'It's true that she was the mother of us both—and I'd rather you had been beside her when she died than hidden there.' She turned her head away quickly. 'It's that I can't forgive,' she added, with a break in her voice.

'Hannah!' said Margaret, and went a step forward, for Hannah's voice even more than her words overcame her. 'Hannah, I was afraid you

wouldn't let me in: you said I shouldn't enter the door.'

'She wasn't dying then,' Hannah answered harshly, 'and I didn't think it would be yet; besides, one often says things—I even said them to her. I wouldn't have had this happen for all I could see.'

Margaret put her hand on Hannah's arm, but Hannah stood quite rigid and stern, with her face turned towards the still form that was hidden from them.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE dawn came soon in those late August days, but it seemed as if darkness would never be at an end that night. Margaret sat in the living-room, in the big chair by the fireplace, it faced the one that had been her mother's, and she looked at the arm on which she had perched herself so often for the happy morning talks of old—the mornings that were all at an end for ever and ever. She had set the door wide open and the sweet air came in, chilly and reluctant, as if with a sense of what had happened.

Towsey found her presently. 'We wondered where you 'd got to,' she said.

'I went to the garden, and through the field—I wanted to think for a little while.'

'I made the bed in your room ready; but I suppose when you looked in it was still covered up, and you didn't feel like staying there.'

'I don't feel like staying anywhere——'

'It's always like that when the end has come; you see there is not even that left to wait for then.'

'Towsey knows,' Margaret thought; 'every one knows, we all have to go through it.'

'You had better come into the kitchen—there's a cup of hot milk ready, you must want something,' Towsey went on. 'Hannah's just gone to lie down; she's been anxious and wondering what had become of you, but she thought you had gone to the wood, and it was no good looking for you.'

They sat down in the kitchen, opposite each other by the table, the old woman, whose eyes were swollen with weeping, and the girl with the scared white face, who had just seen death for the first time.

'I am thinking of my father,' she said presently to Towsey; 'he doesn't know yet—probably he's grieving for uncle Cyril, but looking forward to coming back to mother. It is so dreadful to think that he'll never see her more.'

'Life's a queer thing,' Towsey answered, 'and difficult to make the best of; and worst when one's old, for then one knows; but when one's young one hopes.'

'There's nothing left to hope for.'

'There is for you, Miss Margaret. When any one's first gone one feels adrift, and doesn't see the good of living oneself, but when one's young others come along. Just you go and lie down, poor lamb, you look worn enough.'

'Is Hannah asleep?'

'Maybe—she's in her room. She's been pretty [illegible]d, but she doesn't like any one to see.'

Margaret put down the milk she could not finish. 'I'll go upstairs,' she said. 'Rest a bit yourself, you look so tired, Towsey dear.' She crept up again, past her mother's closed door, and towards her own room. Hannah's door was open. Margaret hesitated, then went softly towards it and looked in.

Hannah was lying on the bed in her clothes, asleep, or appearing to be asleep. The dawn shed a blue light into the room, and Margaret, standing by her, could see that Hannah had been crying: her face was red and blotched with it. And her cheeks were hollow, her poor nose was very pink, her dull hair seemed to be more scanty than ever: she looked forlorn and very sad. Margaret realised, as she stood there, how little the world had given Hannah, how little it promised her. Slipping off her shoes, she lay down very softly beside her—a little lower than Hannah, so that she could put her head near the moving breast, and her arm up to the square thin shoulder. Hannah opened her eyes and looked at Margaret, then closed them again and, as if in sleep, drew a little closer to her with weary satisfaction, and so for the first time in their lives they rested an hour together. But neither slept, and when it was impossible to feign it longer, they looked at each other, and Margaret knew that Hannah was softened.

'I wrote to you yesterday,' she began, a little grimly, as if ashamed of being anything else. 'I

didn't want Towsey to know—I wouldn't even let mother know—for I'd said you shouldn't come back so often. I went out and posted it myself. It will be there this morning. I didn't think the end was coming, or I would have sent. I'm not as hard as that——'

'You wrote to me!' Margaret exclaimed. 'Why, Hannah, I wrote to you yesterday—yesterday afternoon, our letters will cross on the way, and both will arrive at the same time.'

'It may have been the Lord drawing us to each other.'

'If it had only been in time,' Margaret whispered.

'Perhaps I have seemed harder than I was,' Hannah went on; 'but I didn't forget that she was the mother of us both, and I didn't think it 'd be so soon. I'll never forgive myself while I live.'

'Hannah, I ought to have known you did not mean it all. And of course you couldn't tell that this was going to happen.'

'It was the man that came between,' said Hannah bitterly; 'it's always a man that comes between women.'

Then Margaret pulled herself up on the bed and sat there beside Hannah, looking at her upturned face.

'Mother is lying in the next room,' she said, 'and can never know, but for her sake let us try and make things better between us. I want you to believe me, Hannah, when I say solemnly that

I never tried to take Mr. Garratt from you, or wanted him, or could help anything that he did.'

'It doesn't matter,' Hannah answered. 'He's a base sordid man, and I've done with him for ever. He's been here lately, and I've told him so. He only came after me because his mother had heard that the farm would be mine. If the truth's to be told I never thought much of him, and as for taking a man, caring as he does for theatres and races, for I've found out that he goes to both, why, I'd rather die. But we needn't talk of him any more; he'll never come here again.'

Then Margaret drew a little closer to her, for even through her own sorrow and the misery of the night her heart was aching for Hannah, and clung to her.

'What have you done about the play acting?' Hannah asked after a minute or two.

'I have given it up,' and there was another silence. Then, still grim and forlorn-looking, and with the tears welling into her eyes, Hannah spoke in a low voice as if she had brought herself to it.

'Margaret,' she said, 'I've always been very hard on you.'

Margaret bent her head and kissed Hannah's dress and said nothing, for it was true enough, though she forgave it.

'But I'd like you to understand,' Hannah went on, 'then you won't think so bad of me.

You see father came when I was old enough to know, and took mother from me. I felt that he took her, and there was the way he thought about religion and the way that you thought.'

'Hannah,' said Margaret, 'let us speak of it—it 's better to do so now while death seems to have broken down the barriers between us. I understand what you mean about father's coming, I do indeed—I should have felt it too. But about the religion—you think it a crime that he doesn't believe as you do; but can't you see that if God has given him intellect to think and feel and he has used it quite conscientiously, and so come to the conclusions that are his now, he is an honest man? He proved his honesty by giving up a great deal—all sorts of worldly advantages, and some one he loved very much before he saw our mother, and if he came to a wrong conclusion, don't you think that God—God who you say is a God of love and very just—will at least honour him for being courageous, and not making a pretence?'

'If one doesn't believe in the Lord—' Hannah began.

'Oh, but let me speak,' Margaret went on passionately; 'it 's being honest that matters, and doing right—trying to be all that Christ preached—if we are only that, we can leave the rest. It is not we who doubt God, but you who doubt Him when you think He could be hard and cruel to us.

There are so many forms of religion in the world besides the one that you believe in. Are all the people to be condemned who try to do right but from different points of view? It 's all a mystery and beyond our comprehension.'

'But I 'd like to know what it is you think?' said Hannah.

'I think that we should be thankful for all the beauty and happiness in the world; that we should try never to think unkindly or judge harshly, and that we should help each other all we can, and leave the rest—knowing that we can't understand. Some one wrote once, "I want to accept the facts as they are, however bitter or severe, to be a lover and a student, but never a lawgiver"; which means that we should not judge others, but only love them and help them, and do our work as best we can.'

'I think you mean well; but I wish you felt more about religion,' Hannah said, a little grudgingly. She looked down at her again, for Margaret had crept into her arms. It was a new sensation to feel any one there, and she was almost ashamed of the comfort it gave her. 'I 'm sorry if I seemed hard,' she went on after a pause. 'You know the Bartons were always strict. But you won't go away again? I can't bear to think of you in London.'

'I don't want to go away again,' Margaret answered; 'I want to stay here with you and

father; I feel as if I could never go anywhere else as long as I live.'

'There hasn't been anything wrong?' Hannah asked with a note of alarm. 'You haven't done anything you shouldn't?'

'No, Hannah, nothing; but I wish I had never gone.'

'There 's always something to be sorry for; we have to bear it as the penalty of our weakness. I 'd give all I had in the world to remember that we 'd both stood by mother at the last,' Hannah answered with a sigh; and then she said—almost tenderly, 'You had better try and sleep a little, you look worn out, and there 's father to tell yet. It 'll be bad for him; I don't know how he 'll take it.' She held Margaret closer and watched her, and gradually, worn out with the long night and weeping and excitement, they fell asleep.

Towsey came in a couple of hours later and looked at them.

'I never thought to see them like that together,' she said, and went softly out again. 'I wish she had seen it—but there, perhaps she does, she may be standing by looking on, for all we know.'

Sir George Stringer went to Great College Street early that afternoon, for the expression of Margaret's face haunted him, and he could not rest till he had seen her again. Mrs. Gilman

told him of Margaret's sudden departure the night before and the reason of it.

'Poor thing! poor thing!' he said to himself as he walked away. 'I think I'll go to Chidhurst for the week-end. I might be of some use to her —that young scoundrel Tom is in Scotland, and she has only the queer half-sister to look after her.' An hour later saw him on his way.

He walked across the fields in the evening to the farm, and stopped hesitating in the porch, afraid to enter or to ring and disturb the silence that death consecrates.

Hannah saw him and came forward, gaunt and sad.

'Did you want to see any one?' she asked.

'I heard that your mother was dead,' he answered awkwardly; 'I came to ask if I could be of any use.. I have known her husband all my life—where is Margaret?'

'She's lying down; she's made her head bad with fretting.'

'What have you done about her father?'

'We haven't told him yet. Margaret says he's coming back. It will be bad for him then.'

'But he ought to be told.'

'We'll send a telegram to-morrow. It'll be time enough; it's no good hurrying sorrow on him. He'll have had a day longer to think he'll see her again.'

Sir George looked at her shrewdly: 'A kind

woman at heart,' he thought, and then he said aloud. 'You know that he is Lord Eastleigh now?'

'Yes, I know, but it doesn't matter. It won't make any difference to the end.'

'You are quite right,' and he shook her hand. 'Give my love to Margaret,' he said, and turned away. 'It would be a good thing,' he thought, as he went back across the fields to his house, 'if we all lived in the country; upon my soul, I liked that woman to-night.'

CHAPTER XXXV

WHEN Tom had travelled all night, and driven five miles by the edge of a forest at the foot of a chain of hills, he found himself at the place the Lakemans had taken near Pitlochry. A lovely house with a wood round it, and through it a view of a glen, and a stream that hurried white and frothing towards the distance. He asked how Miss Lakeman was, in a whisper, half-expecting to hear that she was dead.

'Miss Lakeman hasn't been very well, sir,' the servant answered, and showed him into a charming room where there was a divine view from the open windows. Near the farther window there was a breakfast-table laid daintily for two, with fresh fruit and late roses in a bowl. Lena was lying on a sofa beside it, in a muslin gown, just as Mrs. Lakeman had told Dawson Farley she would be. Her face looked thin and pale, her eyes large and restless, she seemed weak and worried, but there was not a sign of dangerous illness about her. She tried to raise herself as he entered, but apparently was not able to do so.

'Tom, dear,' she said, 'I have been waiting for you—I knew you would come.'

'Of course you did,' he answered; 'but what 's the matter?'

'I have been ill—very ill, but I 'm better. I shall be well now you have come.'

'I thought you were dying,' he said a little resentfully, thinking that he had been hurried away from Margaret for nothing.

'I should have died if you hadn't come,' she answered; 'sit down—there,' and she signed to a chair by the sofa.

'Where 's Mrs. Lakeman?' he asked, looking round uneasily.

'She has one of her bad attacks of neuralgia. You are glad to come to us?' She turned up her great eyes almost imploringly at him.

'Yes—but I don't understand.' He looked out at the glen beneath the windows, and followed the course of the stream with his eyes. 'That sort of telegram shouldn't be sent without a good deal of reason.'

'But I have been very ill, Tom dear, and I have wanted you so.' She gave a long sigh and held out her hands; he looked at her uneasily, but he did not take them. Somehow her manner was different, and a misgiving, he did not know of what, rose in his heart. 'I felt that no one else could make me well,' she added, in her insinuating voice.

'Good! We'll see what can be done—are you going to give me some breakfast?'

'It will be here directly. Tell me about naughty little Margaret. Is her lover with her?'

'Why, not now, I have just come away.' He didn't like being called a lover, it sounded rather foolish. 'She and I are engaged; I telegraphed yesterday——'

'Oh, but it was only a little joke, Tom, dear, you wouldn't be so unkind to Mr. Garratt.'

'It's all nonsense about Mr. Garratt—' He stopped, for the breakfast was brought in. 'Look here, I'd better pour out the coffee,' he said, and rose with alacrity. When he had given her some toast and buttered a scone and helped himself to kidneys and bacon, he felt distinctly better. 'Now then,' he went on, 'it's all nonsense about Mr. Garratt; and she and I are going to get married as quickly as possible.'

'No no, Tom, dear, it's not nonsense,' Lena said with one of her usual wriggles. 'She told me all about him, and I saw them meet in the wood, you know.'

But he refused even to discuss it.

'That's all nonsense,' he repeated firmly. 'What's the matter with Mrs. Lakeman?'

'It's only neuralgia,' Lena answered, 'you know she has a bad black day now and then. You don't mind being with me, Tom, dear? We always like being together?' She was beginning to find

that she couldn't hold him, that she had attempted more than she could carry out. She almost wished she had left him to Margaret, her power over him seemed to be gone, she felt it already, and she was handicapped by her mother's absence.

With a puzzled air he ate his breakfast. 'What have you done to yourself?' he asked, when he had finished; 'have you caught a cold, or over-tired yourself, or just given in and taken to a sofa for no particular reason?'

'I 'm not strong,' she said, looking up at him; 'and I felt as if I couldn't bear the waiting. We expected you every day—why didn't you come?'

'I was with Margaret,' he answered; at which Lena turned and buried her face in the cushions and sobbed softly to herself.

'Oh, but look here, what is the matter?' he asked in dismay; 'there 's something behind all this, tell me what it means?'

'It means that I am going to die,' she said. 'I must die, I can't live.' She held out her hands to him again, and almost against his will he felt himself going towards her till he had taken them in his. 'I want you, dear,' she said, and twined her arms round his neck. 'I can't let you go to little Margaret. She has Mr. Garratt, remember, and I shall only live a little while. You must stay with me till I die—you will, won't you?'

'This is all nonsense,' he said again, in a kindly [illegible]ionate manner as a brother might have done,

and gave her a kiss for the simple reason that he didn't know what else to do. 'You are ill and played out.'

'Yes, I'm ill,' she said, and wriggled more completely into his arms.

He sincerely wished she wouldn't, but he held her for a few minutes rather awkwardly and then laid her back limply on the sofa.

'Look here,' he said, 'I should like to go and unpack, and all that; you ought to rest for a bit.'

'Do you want to unpack now?' she asked in a pathetic voice.

'Yes, now,' he answered briskly, 'you go to sleep.'

Of all the days Tom had ever lived that was the strangest—that day alone with Lena, who was ill and not ill; with Mrs. Lakeman—invisible he couldn't tell why; and with something at the back of—he couldn't tell what. He wrote out some telegrams before he went upstairs. When he came down they had gone, and some instinct told him there was a reason for their disappearance; that the answer that came from Margaret later in the day was juggled, but how or why he didn't know: it flitted across his brain that perhaps the telegrams had not gone; but that was absurd, he thought: of course they had gone. Lena wriggled and looked in his face and talked in low tones and called him 'dear,' but she had always done that. She did it to most people, and though

to-day it made him uncomfortable he couldn't bring himself to attach importance to it; he didn't even like being puzzled by it. Perhaps Mrs. Lakeman would be down to-morrow, he thought, and then things would explain themselves. Meanwhile he comforted himself by writing a long letter to Margaret, and with hoping that the morning would bring him one from her, but when it came there was not a sign. Then he felt uneasy, and determined that unless there was some good reason to the contrary he would go back to London that night.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MRS. LAKEMAN appeared as naturally as possible at the Pitlochry breakfast-table the next morning. She looked haggard and ill with her two nights' travel, and now that the excitement of getting Tom away from London and of the interview with Margaret was over, she asked herself once or twice whether the game was worth the candle. After all, she thought, Tom had only three or four thousand a year, and she didn't believe he would ever do much in politics. It was the dread of losing him that had roused her, the dramatic situation that had interested her, but now that she had created the situation she didn't know what to do with it, she was even a trifle bored. But everything bored her. She was a woman of humour and enterprise rather than of passion and sentiment, so that nothing kept a lasting hold upon her when once its novelty had gone. In some sort of fashion she knew herself to be a sham, always experimenting with effects and make-belief feelings, for try as she would, she could never drive realities home into her heart. In a sense Lena was like her, always wanting the thing

beyond her reach, and experiencing a curious sense of satiety as soon as she possessed it. Even the presence of Tom after the long interviews of yesterday had lost some of its fascination.

'I don't think I want him,' she told her mother; 'but I don't want to let him go.'

'It's my opinion that I made a fool of myself in going up to London,' Mrs. Lakeman said. Her energy had flagged; she wondered at her own nerve in going to Margaret; she scoffed at Dawson Farley and his proposal of marriage; she felt Tom to be in the way at Pitlochry. There were some people staying at Kingussie, she had heard of them from an acquaintance she met on the platform at Euston, and she wanted to get them over to Pitlochry. They were rich people and full of enterprise, a couple of grown-up sons, too, the elder infinitely better off than Tom Carringford: it was quite possible that he would fall in love with Lena. The worst of it was that Tom was here; besides, she had set herself a task and had to go through with it. After all, it might afford her some amusement and she was always eager for that; better begin and get it over. She took him into the garden after breakfast to a seat in a secluded corner under a pear tree: the glen and the rushing gurgling brook were behind and made an accompaniment to their interview.

'Well, what about Margaret Vincent?' she [redacted]sked him.

'I have had no letter from her,' he said; 'I don't understand it.'

'I didn't think there would be one,' she answered significantly, and with an insolence in her manner that put him on the defensive.

'Why didn't you?'

Mrs. Lakeman smiled and said nothing.

'You got my telegram,' he inquired, 'telling you we were engaged?' Lena had spoken of it half a dozen times yesterday, but he could hardly believe that so important a communication could have been received in the cavalier fashion in which Mrs. Lakeman had treated it.

'Of course.'

'I can't think what your telegram meant,' he said. 'Lena isn't dangerously ill or anything like it.'

Then Mrs. Lakeman tried to rouse herself a little. 'Tom Carringford,' she said, 'do you know that I am the best friend you ever had?'

'I know that you have been awfully good to me.'

'Shall I tell you why I telegraphed as I did?'

'I wish you would, for I can't make it out.'

'Dawson Farley told me about Margaret Vincent. I have heard a great deal about Margaret Vincent lately from a good many sources.—Tom,' she went on in a suddenly tragic voice, 'I loved Gerald Vincent, I have never really cared for anybody else, but this girl is

different, she has been brought up by a common mother——'

'She is not at all common,' he answered indignantly. 'I saw her——'

'And a half-sister who twenty years ago would have been in respectable service instead of wasting her time at home, for the mother looks after the farm herself. Margaret belongs to her mother's people and not to her father's, you can hear that in her provincial accent'—the accent of course was invented on the spur of the moment—'and she was quite content to marry her Guildford grocer, or whatever he is, until she became stage-struck.'

'Look here,' said Tom, 'you are a good soul and have been very kind to me, but you mustn't talk to me in this way, for I 'm engaged to Margaret, and mean to marry her.'

'You 'll pay dearly for it if you do.' She stopped a minute, then she lowered her voice; but she was becoming excited; after all there was some interest left in the situation, and she offered up her child's dignity to its dramatic possibility. 'There was something more in the telegram than I have told you,' she said. 'You are killing Lena, and not behaving like an honourable gentleman.'

'What do you mean?' he asked bewildered, but remembering uncomfortably Lena's manner of yesterday.'

'I mean,' said Mrs. Lakeman indignantly, for it was a theory of hers that a claim was always stronger than a plea and gained more consideration, 'that you have no right to marry Margaret Vincent or anybody else. I mean that you have made my child love you, that you are all the world to her, and you made her believe that she was all the world to you.'

'We have never been anything but friends.' He was aghast; but he looked her straight in the eyes.

'Outwardly. At heart you have been lovers, and you can't deny it. She has given you the one love of her life, dear'—Mrs. Lakeman was becoming sentimental—'and I never dreamt that you had not given her yours. You can go back to Margaret Vincent if you like, but you have killed my child—my one only child. You must see how ill she looks, how changed she is?'

'But this is ghastly,' he said; 'I 'm not a bit in love with Lena. I never cared for any one in that way but Margaret, and I want to marry her.'

'Go and marry her,' Mrs. Lakeman answered in a low voice; 'Lena will not be alive to see it. Do you suppose that I would give away my own child's secret, or bring myself to speak to you as I am doing now, if it were not a case of life and death'; she said the last words with a thrill.

He looked at her in despair.

'What are you going to do?' she asked after a pause.

He turned away and followed the course of the stream with his eyes as it rushed through the glen. This was very awkward, he thought, but for the life of him he didn't believe in it.

'You have been very kind to me,' he said; 'but it's no good not telling the truth about a thing of this sort—I couldn't marry Lena. I'm very fond of her, but she isn't the kind of girl that I could fall in love with; she flops about too much, and you never know where you have her; as for her being desperately in love with me, why, I don't believe it. We should worry each other to death if we were married; besides, I mean to marry Margaret Vincent.'

'If the grocer hasn't stolen a march on you?'

'Look here,' he answered, turning very red, 'if you say that sort of thing we shall quarrel.'

'I don't care,' she answered defiantly; 'if you can't behave like a gentleman it doesn't matter whether we quarrel or not.'

'You know,' he said, 'I don't believe in this business—I mean in Lena's being in love with me.'

'I should have thought you might have seen it yesterday.' She turned and almost demanded, 'what are you going to do?'

'I shall go back to town at once; but it's no good not being straight in a matter of this sort, so first I shall have it out with Lena.'

'It will be thoroughly indecent of you.'

'Can't help it, I 'm going;' and he marched towards the house and into the morning-room again.

Lena was lying on the sofa; he went up to her and sat down in a business-like manner beside her.

'Look here, I want to talk to you,' he said; 'this place has become a sort of nightmare, and I want you to wake me up from it like a sensible girl.'

'Tell me about it, Tom dear,' she said, and wriggled towards the edge of the sofa. 'You wouldn't talk to me yesterday.'

'Too much worried. Now then,' he went on drawing back a little and looking her well in the face, 'I have fallen in love with Margaret Vincent. She has been in London for the last three weeks, and we have seen each other every day—perhaps you didn't know that? It's all nonsense to suppose that she's in love with Mr. Garratt—I have found out the truth of that business. He is merely a bounder who went to look after Hannah, the half-sister, then found out he liked Margaret better—I don't wonder. Hannah bothered her about it and she went up to town. Louise Hunstan wired me from Bayreuth that Margaret was in Great College Street, and I went and looked after her. If this hadn't happened—your wires I mean—I dare say we should have been married by this time. I want you to be good to Margaret,' and he put his hand affectionately

on Lena's. 'I love her, and don't mean to marry anybody else. Now then, how is it going to be?'

'Poor little Margaret, I shall love her because you do.'

Tom blinked his eyes to make sure he was awake; either Mrs. Lakeman was as mad as a March hare, he thought, or he was dreaming, for there was not a sign of disappointment in Lena's manner.

'Oh,' he said helplessly.

'It will be nice for her to marry you, dear,' she went on; 'you are so different from Mr. Garratt.'

'Mr. Garratt has nothing to do with it. But unless you take kindly to the marriage, of course we shall have to cut each other afterwards. Well, then, is it all right?'

'Of course it is,' she answered, and wriggled closer to him.

'Good! Now I am going,' he said with determination.

'But where are you going?'

'Over to Aviemore—I know some people there. I shall take the train back to London this evening.'

'Dear Tom,' she sighed, 'how glad little Margaret will be to see you——'

He had risen and gone towards the window.

'It 's all right,' he said to Mrs. Lakeman, who had sauntered up with a newspaper in her hand; 'Lena 's a sensible girl—I knew she was.'

Mrs. Lakeman looked at him almost vacantly,

she had ceased to take the slightest interest in his love affairs. 'Have you seen the "Scotsman"?' she asked, 'the boy has just come with it.'

'No, why?'

'Cyril is dead, and Gerald is Lord Eastleigh.'

'Good! he'll be coming back,' Tom answered; 'I'm off in half an hour,' he added.

'Oh!' She was too pre-occupied even to ask him to stay; but when he had gone, as if with a jerk, she remembered the excitement of the morning. 'We made a nice fiasco over Tom,' she said to Lena; 'I don't know which is the greater idiot, you or I.'

'It was very interesting,' Lena answered. 'But I should never have energy enough for the life he likes. I can't bear coarse effects or strong lights or exercise, or any of the things he cares for—people should always be restful.'

'You had better marry a minor poet,' Mrs. Lakeman answered with easy scorn, 'or an inferior painter, and live in a Chelsea studio.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

TOM CARRINGFORD went straight to Great College Street the next morning. Margaret, of course, was not there, but Louise Hunstan had arrived, and from her and Mrs. Gilman together he heard of Mrs. Lakeman's visit, of Margaret's assertion that her engagement was broken off, of how Sir George Stringer and Dawson Farley had been to see her, and of Margaret's hurried departure to Chidhurst.

'Well,' said Miss Hunstan when they were alone, and the little twang Tom always liked came into her voice, 'I think this is a matter that requires some investigation; you know it's my opinion that Lena Lakeman is just a little snake and that her mother doesn't always know what she's about —still, they're amusing people if you don't see too much of them.'

'Oh, they're all right if you don't take them seriously,' he answered, incapable of thinking ill of any one. He was not in the least alarmed at Margaret's statement to Mrs. Gilman. He knew [redacted]t Margaret loved him, and that if any mischief

had been made,—why, it would soon be explained away. The thing that astonished him was Mrs. Lakeman's visit. 'I can't think how she could have been shut up in her room with neuralgia and in London at the same time,' he said to himself. 'She is certainly mad. I shall go to Chidhurst this afternoon,' he told Miss Hunstan; 'I might be of some use, and I want to see Margaret.' He knew that if her mother were ill she would be unhappy and want him, and he began casting about in his mind for things he could take an invalid. There were heaps of flowers in the Dutch garden, of course; but she might like a box of roses all the same—and Margaret would remember the first one they had bought together — and peaches and grapes; he didn't remember seeing any glass at Woodside Farm, perhaps they hadn't any. 'I'm awfully fond of Margaret,' he said to Louise Hunstan, glad to put it into words; 'and we shall have a splendid time together. You'll often see us here, you know.'

'Of course I shall,' she answered, 'I am just looking forward to it.'

He stopped at Sir George Stringer's house as he drove through Whitehall, but only to find that he had gone to Chidhurst. 'Good,' he said absently to himself, 'I'll telegraph to him and he'll put me up.'

Tom remembered all his life the drive from

Haslemere to Chidhurst that evening. He enjoyed every yard of it—up the hill and past the cottages, along the road beyond, beside the moor covered with ling, and through Chidhurst village, till he came in sight of the church, and the gates of Sir George Stringer's house just opposite the little one that led across the fields to the farm. He looked at the box of roses, and the basket of peaches and grapes on the driver's seat. 'I hope my mother-in-law is better,' he thought, with a happy laugh in his eyes. 'I believe I shall be fond of her; and Vincent is a brick.'

'You know there's a death at the farm, sir?' the driver said, as he got down. 'Mrs. Vincent was took the night before last, after two days' illness—she hadn't been herself for some time.'

An hour later a little note was brought to Margaret.

'Dearest (it ran), I am at Stringer's house, and have just heard. I know how unhappy you must be, and there isn't anything to say, except that I love you—which you know already. I am glad I saw her. Send for me when you can see me, I shall be waiting here.
Your devoted TOM.'

And so that trouble was lifted from Margaret's heart, but her tears fell fast while she read the letter.

'If mother were only here!' she thought. 'I [redacted] bear to tell Hannah, for she has nothing in

her life—nothing to look forward to. Towsey!' she went into the kitchen, and Towsey started —she was almost asleep. Margaret sat down on her lap, as she had often done years ago when she was a little girl, and put her arms round Towsey's neck, and cried softly for a minute or two on her shoulder. 'I want you to tell me something,' she said, when she looked up; 'are you quite sure that mother smiled when she had the telegram that last day she was alive?'

'Ay, that she did,' Towsey answered; 'it didn't hold much, but she seemed to read a great deal into it, somehow.'

'Thank God!' said Margaret, 'she must have known. It was from Mr. Carringford, Towsey.'

'She told me,' said Towsey; 'and she thought how it 'd be.'

It was almost more than Margaret could bear. 'If I had only not gone away!' she cried; 'Mother dear—mother.'

Mr. Vincent, to call him by his old name, did not return nearly so soon as he might have done. There were his brother's affairs to wind up, he said, and his brother's wife had to be settled down in a house at Melbourne. Perhaps he dreaded returning to the farm alone: at any rate, he made excuses, and it was nearly four months

before he wrote that in another fortnight he would set sail.

All that time Tom and Margaret were waiting to be married. Tom had argued that it would be better to do it quietly and at once, but Margaret refused.

'Not yet,' she pleaded; 'let us wait the few months till father returns. We have all our lives to give each other. I don't feel as if I could go into the little church to be married just yet; it 's only—' She stopped, for she did not want him to know that she dreaded lest she should still hear the sound of heavy shuffling feet, and think of the day when her mother had been carried into it for the last time. She wanted to forget it, to remember only the long happy years, and the mornings she had sat on the arm of the chair in the cool living-place, leaning against her while they watched the sunshine covering the Dutch garden with glory.

'We might, of course, be married at some other church?' he suggested.

'Oh, no,' she answered quickly, 'I wouldn't for the world. I want to be married near the dear farm—and near her: she would listen and be so happy if she knew. Oh, Tom, you do understand, don't you, darling?' And for answer he took her in his arms and kissed her, which is the best answer a man can give the woman who loves him.

So they waited till the winter had gone; a long silent winter, though it held its whispered happiness. February came cold and clear. The men were busy in the fields turning the brown earth over; and here and there under the hedges a snowdrop hid, lonely and shivering. Then one day Hannah had a stroke of wisdom, or at any rate Tom thought it one.

'I don't see how you can get married directly father comes either,' she said; 'he'll find it hard enough to come back to an empty house; you can't well fling a wedding in his face. For my part, I think it would be a good thing to get it over beforehand, and go out and meet him.'

Tom looked at her for a moment, and then shook her hand vigorously, as he always did when anything pleased him mightily. 'You are quite right,' he said, and the next minute he was striding towards the wood where Margaret was waiting for him. 'Look here,' he said, when he found her, 'Hannah has had a brilliant idea. Some one ought to go and meet your father; he can't come back here alone, you know.'

'Oh, Tom,' she answered, 'I have often thought how dreadful it will be for him.'

'Of course it will, and we have no business to let him do it. Suppose we went out and picked him up at Naples and brought him back ourselves. You see Hannah could make everything

comfortable here while we are gone—alter things a bit, and so on. Perhaps we could keep him two or three days in Stratton Street on the way back, and get Hannah up there.' All manner of developments crossed his fertile mind while he spoke. 'We must get married before we start,' he added, in a business-like tone, as if it were only a matter of convenience, 'or we should have to get a chaperon, which would be rather a bore.'

And so it came about that they were married very quietly one morning six months after Mrs. Vincent's death. Hannah and Margaret walked across the fields together, and Tom and Sir George Stringer met them at the church gate, but there were no others present.

Tom's sister, who was with her husband in India, sent Margaret a diamond comb and a long letter; Mrs. Lakeman sent her a fitted travelling-bag, and Lena sent a full-sized green porcelain cat.

It is more than a year since that morning at the church. The Carringfords are in Florence with Lord Eastleigh and Sir George Stringer, and they are looking forward to Louise Hunstan, who is coming out on a six weeks' holiday. Lena Lakeman has married an army doctor and gone to Egypt. Mrs. Lakeman, who was very angry at the marriage, which she thought a bad one,

took to speculating in Klondyke mines and left England lately for Alaska to look after her ventures. It was said last year that she had made a great fortune, but even if it is true she will probably lose it again, and console herself with the thought that the sensation of being a beggar is altogether a new one.

Hannah is at Chidhurst alone, and something surprising may occur. For one afternoon last March, a stranger arrived at the farm, a loutish-looking man of six-and-thirty, but with more intelligence in him than appeared on the surface. He was a student of agriculture, he explained, second son of a landowner in Somersetshire, and had a fancy for renting a property in Surrey. He had heard that Woodside Farm might possibly want a tenant. Hannah assured him to the contrary with some asperity; but, eventually, being overcome by the stranger's manner, she not only showed him over the farm, but, since he had come from a distance, gave him tea with a dish of chicken fried in batter, and scones that had been hurriedly made by Towsey. She confided to him, while the meal progressed, that she found the farm somewhat difficult to manage single-handed. The stranger felt the truth of this, and she struck him as being a most sensible and capable woman. A farm, he told her, wanted a man to look after it, to which she agreed, and invited him to come again.

'The coming of the stranger,' said Margaret, when she heard of it.

Tom looked at her for a moment, then her meaning dawned on him. 'Good, good,' he said, 'history makes a point of repeating itself.'

Meanwhile the villagers nod their heads, and say that this year spring cleaning was even more thorough than usual at Woodside Farm.

THE END

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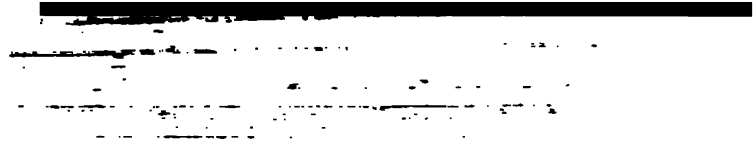

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